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A NORTHERN LILY



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Five Years of an Uneventful Life

BY

JOANNA HARRISON

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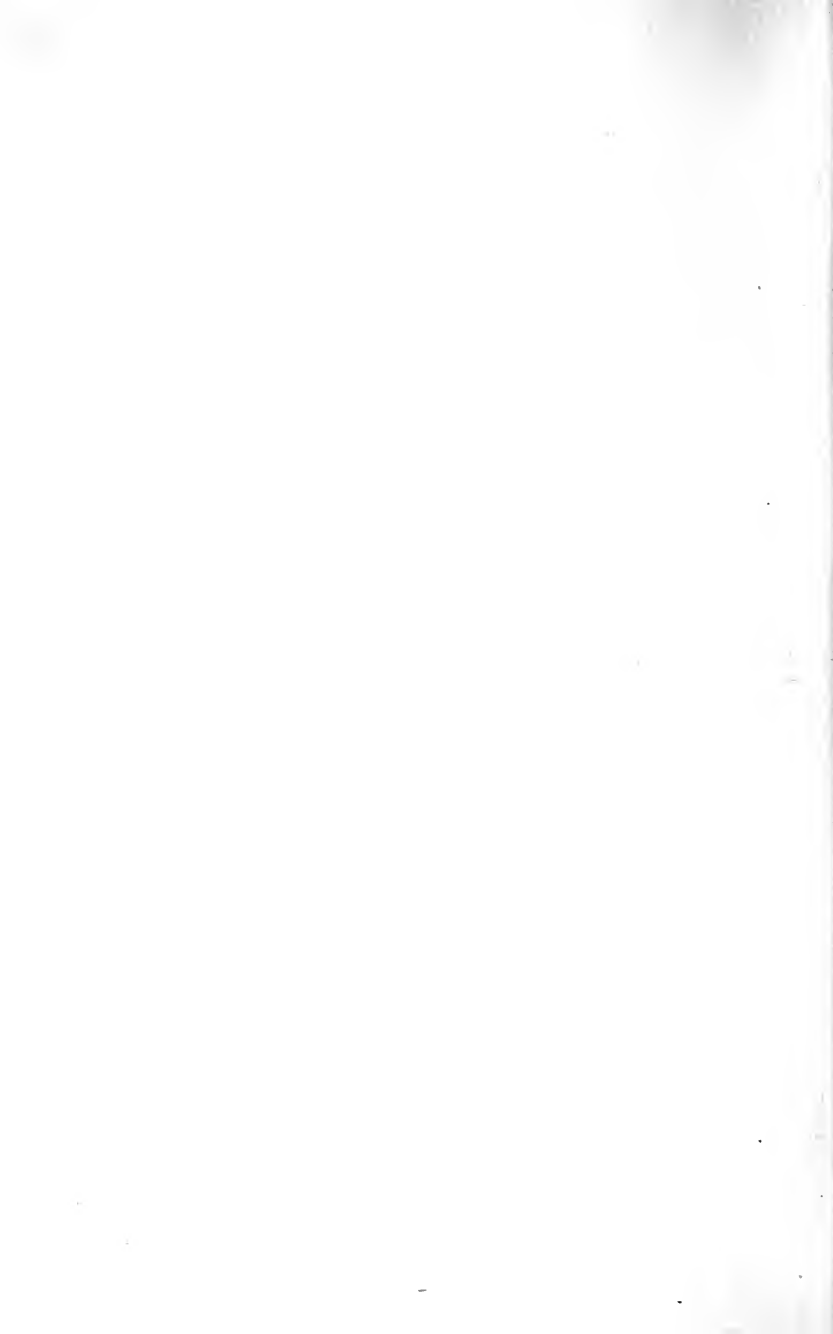
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PART I.

VOL. I.

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CHAPTER I.

‘On the Home farm some watch the ploughman’s furrow,
And talk of bullocks and the price of oats.’

‘A QUARTER-PAST five,’ said Elsie Ross,
‘and no post yet.’

The letters at Rossie were usually brought in with the kettle at afternoon tea-time—the only post in the day, strange as it may seem to the southern reader.

‘Not that I expect anything—but—here it is—and—yes! there is one for me. Not from Fräulein—from—I don’t know whom.’

She opened the letter, which was rather long, and adorned with numerous dashes, flourishes, and points of exclamation; and read it thoughtfully.

‘—— to leave your Scottish home, and find a resting-place under our roof, where,

I need not say, you will receive a true WELCOME!’

‘To leave my Scottish home!’ said Elsie to herself. ‘I won’t,—and yet, perhaps——’

‘Elsie, do you want to see the new bull?’ said a gruff, an exceedingly gruff, voice in the passage.

‘I do, papa,’ said Elsie, jumping up and thrusting the letter into her pocket. ‘Can’t give my mind to it now, but *he’ll* need to be consulted. I’ll speak to him at dinner; at least, I will if he likes the bull.’

Rossie was a small old-fashioned house on the north-east coast of Scotland. Very lonely; for, except in the little fishing town of St. Ethernans, the Rosses had no neighbours within ten miles. There was an old castle on a crag close by, and a fine rocky line of shore; a bad coast for fishermen, and many a herring-boat had been lost upon those rocks in the fierce north-eastern gales.

Inland the country was well farmed, and looked thriving, if somewhat bleak. A blue

line of hills bounded the view on the north and west.

The Rosses were an old family, though the property was small. It was strictly entailed on heirs-male, and for hundreds of years a Ross of Rossie had not been wanting to carry on the direct line of descent, so it was naturally a great disappointment to the present Laird that his only child should be a girl. Mrs. Ross had died when Elsie was only five ; she was now seventeen, and Captain Robert Ross was still a widower.

Elsie had often been told that her father was likely to marry again ; indeed she had many times been solemnly prepared for this event by her too far-seeing relatives, until, as she herself said, she was tired of the subject, and had ceased to expect anything to come of it. Yet now, at the beginning of our story, something is going to come of it ; and to poor Elsie it is something of a blow.

Captain Ross was not by any means attractive, either in appearance or manners. His little daughter had often looked at the

lovely picture of her mother which hung in the drawing-room, and wondered why she married him. It was a sweet sad face, and the child had inherited something of its wistful expression.

But the second wife Captain Ross had chosen, if indeed he could be said to have chosen her, was very different from the high-bred graceful lady in the picture.

‘Preserve me, Robert! what can you see in yon woman?’ exclaimed his Aunt Grizel, when he first announced his engagement to Miss Euphemia Webster.

‘I don’t see anything in her,’ replied Robert briefly, ‘but I must marry somebody. Why not a healthy young woman in the neighbourhood?’

‘It is scarcely fair to Elsie,’ said the old lady gravely.

But Robert walked away with a few inarticulate growls, probably to the effect that if Elsie chose to be a girl instead of a boy, she must take the consequences. Captain Ross’s thoughts, however, were at present

much more occupied with his cattle than with his future bride; and the new bull's arrival was an all-important event in his eyes.

Elsie hastily caught up her old straw hat from the table, and with her little brown dachshund 'Hans,' pursued her parent, who, without waiting for her, had already nearly reached the farmyard.

'Where have they put him, papa?' said Elsie. 'Must we go through the byre? Hans! come here at once.'

The Laird eyed his daughter contemptuously as she carefully picked up the reluctant Hans. 'Put down that brute, can't you,' he growled, 'the cattle won't touch him.'

'Papa, he'd never come in, he hates the cattle—they *breathe* at him. He would only stay outside and lose me, and eat dead rats and things.'

'A useless fool!' said the Laird, as he unwound the last twist of tarred string which fastened the byre door—'I'll have it destroyed.'

Elsie, quite unmoved by this threat, followed her father as he strode past the long line of fat cattle to the bull's enclosure, which was fenced off by a wooden rail. Here they found the grieve and the cattle-man standing in easy attitudes contemplating the new arrival. The cattle-man moved a little to one side and touched his cap in silence; Sandy, the grieve, who was a privileged person, fond of long words and long harangues, merely waved his hand bull-wards, and addressed his master—'A graand baste yon, Captain! Just rin your eye ower him. There's a semmetry! He's a pairfect picter—far afore the Drumsheugh bull!'

The Laird made no reply in words, but with a stolid air he prodded the big shorthorn hard with his stick, leaving a round patch of red mud on its glossy skin. His countenance was carefully divested of all expression whatever; a sure sign to Elsie that her father was more than satisfied. This was, she knew, his way of showing the most lively delight; when displeased, his face had no

lack of expression, but he never smiled, and seldom laughed except in the bitterest irony. The Laird was not blessed with the sweetest of tempers, yet he was really, in the main, a kind-hearted man. He would never do a cruel thing to man or beast, though he would utter the most blood-curdling threats on the smallest provocation.

He was a middle-sized man, verging on fifty ; heavily built, though not stout ; rugged featured and fresh coloured. He wore an excessively old brown coat and hat ; his corduroy trousers were tied below the knee ; his legs encased in marvellously strong gaiters well splashed with mud.

Elsie stood by his side, her pretty hands resting on the paling : she had deposited her dog in an empty cattle-trough, out of harm's way. She scarcely looked as if she could be that rough man's daughter—a tall, very slender figure, with a soft pale face and large blue-gray eyes. Her thick hair was wound in heavy plaits round her little head ; fair shining hair, which yet looked almost dark

against the pure paleness of her skin. Elsie's dress was far from being of a fashionable or expensive kind ; yet in her short blue serge gown and yellow petticoat she might have stepped straight out of some old picture.

‘He is a beautiful bull, papa, and he does not look as if he would ever become fierce.’

The bull's perfect good humour under the repeated and severe prods of the Laird prompted this last remark from Elsie ; and, the examination being satisfactorily concluded, the party prepared to leave the byre.

The dinner at Rossie that evening was an unusually cheerful meal ; the Laird was in his best mood, and Hans was permitted to be of the party. Elsie never brought him into the dining-room if her father was at all out of humour ; he would not hurt him, she knew, but she did not like to hear her dog reviled, and his life threatened, by her irascible parent. Hans, who had no proper pride, and who was exceedingly sagacious where food was concerned, sat close to the Laird, gazing at him admiringly, and with

glistening eyes, waiting patiently for the cheese-rind which the master of the house seldom failed to bestow on him.

Elsie's thoughts were intent upon the letter she had received that afternoon; and she was about to introduce the subject when a sudden question from her father made her start.

'Is this Lent?' he demanded.

'No, papa, Lent is over. This is Easter week.'

'*That's* a good thing!' said the Laird.

Elsie wondered what had produced this sudden interest in Church matters.

'He never goes to church,' thought she, 'and I do not see that he mortifies the flesh; I am sorry Lent is over if he wishes to do so.'

'Why, papa?' she asked rather timidly.

'Affects the cattle-markets,' was the reply. 'You might have known that.'

'Papa, I have had a letter from my Aunt Caroline—Mrs. Lindsay, you know, in England.'

‘What does she want?’ said the Laird, helping himself to fish.

‘She asks me to go and stay at Chippingham—to pay them a long visit.’

Captain Ross laid down his fork and looked at his daughter.

‘Do you want to go?’ he asked.

‘I think,’ said Elsie, lifting her eyes courageously to his, ‘I should like to go away for a while—just now.’

‘I don’t see that you could do better,’ said her father, after a short pause. This reply was unexpected; and in spite of Elsie’s desire to go away, and thus avoid living with her future stepmother, it gave her a sudden pang.

‘Does he wish to get rid of me?’ she thought. But the Laird’s next remark, though only muttered as if to himself, reassured her.

‘Wouldn’t agree, of course—can’t expect—better out of that.’

‘Of course I would come back,’ said Elsie a little appealingly. Here Bella, the ‘table-

maid,' entered with a dish, and there was a short silence.

'Papa, what sort of a person is Aunt Caroline?' asked Elsie when they were alone again.

'I don't suppose there's any harm in the woman,' returned the Laird. 'Mad, you know—quite mad. She's got some sort of a religious craze.'

'And my uncle? Is he religious too?'

'How should I know? He didn't use to be, but I daresay she has given it him by this time.'

He spoke as though religion were a mental disease of an infectious nature, but Elsie knew his manner, and the supposed insanity of her relations caused her no anxiety.

'When do you want to go?' he asked presently.

'Aunt Caroline wishes me to come as soon as may be convenient. You have never told me,' she added, with an effort to speak unconcernedly, 'what day you are to be married.'

‘End of next week,’ said the Laird, rising. ‘You had better start on Tuesday or Wednesday. Go and see the old lady to-morrow, and make arrangements.’

‘Aunt Grizel?’ said Elsie. ‘Very well, papa;’ and the conversation ended.

CHAPTER II.

‘ The day is over,
The feverish careful day ;
Can I recover
Strength that has ebbd away ?
Can even sleep such freshness give
That I again should wish to live ?’

ELSIE had gone to bed that night with a troubled mind. Until now she had had no idea of leaving her home, and although she knew her father’s marriage must take place, she could generally manage to put the thought of it away from her. Now, however, that which had seemed to be in the dim future was close at hand ; she must think and act for herself ; and she felt as if life were one great battle, and she had no strength to face it.

The night was wet and stormy, and the dismal sound of the wind and rain against

her window, and the dull roar of the sea, served to depress her still more. She soon fell asleep, however, and slept soundly; the storm passed away through the night, and when she awoke, refreshed, in the cheery April sunshine, half her cares had vanished.

‘I have a great deal before me,’ she thought; ‘the house *must* be left all in order. I shall have to see about it all. It would never do to have anything untidy when Euphemia comes. Then there’s Aunt Grizel this afternoon, and—I ought to go and call on Euphemia. It is my duty, and I’ll do it!’ she added heroically, brushing her hair with extra vigour. ‘It is due to her to let her know I am going away. Poor soul! I daresay she will be thankful.’

The sound of a bell interrupted these reflections. ‘Prayers!’ exclaimed Elsie in dismay; ‘I shall be late. That comes of good resolutions when one is dressing!’ She finished with all speed, and hurried to the dining-room, at the door of which the servants were already waiting.

Since the departure of her governess, six months before, Elsie had made it a rule to read prayers to the household every morning. Her mother, she was told, had been accustomed to do so; and Elsie thought it was her duty, though it caused her no little anxiety and dread. She was far too shy to let her father even know that such was her custom; so, as the Laird did not like to be kept waiting for his breakfast even for a moment, she would beg him not to come in till after 'the second bell,' thereby artfully leading him to suppose that the first bell meant nothing, and was but an empty form.

Elsie chose a short Psalm that morning, then read the prayer for the day from an old-fashioned book of family prayers which she had hunted out of the garret.

Scarcely had she reached the second paragraph when a heavy footstep was heard in the passage. Elsie skilfully omitted a long petition for the conversion of the Jews, arrived rather abruptly at Amen, and rose,

just as the sound of the approaching footsteps stopped outside the door. She looked round—the servants were still on their knees; they were waiting for the concluding prayer. She seized the book once more, and shut it with a loud clap—in vain! they would not take a hint; the three backs remained immovable in their devout posture. Elsie would not hurry over the Lord's Prayer; it would not be right, she felt, so she repeated it slowly and reverently, though with a beating heart, and lo! as by a miracle, the creaking footsteps turned away from the door; it never opened, and the Laird went off in another direction. Nor did he appear until Elsie had in some measure recovered herself; she had even finished her plate of porridge, and put aside the portion destined for Hans, to be kept till his own proper dinner hour. She could not help, however, feeling an uneasy dread that the Laird had been listening at the door (which indeed was the case); she suffered all the pangs of a guilty conscience; yet, when he did come in,

he made no remark on the subject, and did not seem any gruffer than usual.

‘When are you going to see your aunt to-day?’ he inquired during breakfast. ‘I’ll order the pony for you.’

Miss Griselda Ross was the Laird’s aunt as well as Elsie’s, but he never made use of the pronouns *we*, *our*, *us*; it would be beneath him, as it were, to speak in the first person plural, and thus place himself on a level with the inferior beings he addressed.

Elsie said she would go in the afternoon. Her mornings were usually spent in household cares, and to-day she was particularly anxious to get everything into proper order before her stepmother’s arrival.

The household at Rossie consisted of three women-servants—Marjorie, the cook, a sort of fixture in the family, who had been there since Elsie was a baby; Janet, who attended upon her, and was also the housemaid—a good-natured, rather stupid girl; and Bella, the tablemaid. The last was a good-looking young woman with a temper;

she belonged to that class of persons who never make a mistake, in their own estimation at least, and cannot bear the slightest word or even hint of disapproval. She was a clever girl, and did her work well ; but this characteristic rendered her decidedly trying, and she and her mistress had occasional disputes.

‘Bella,’ said Elsie that morning, appearing suddenly in the pantry after breakfast, ‘I noticed last night at dinner that there are holes in the cheese napkin. You must really fasten it lower down—the Captain is so apt to cut it in taking off the rind for Hans.’

Bella surveyed the cheese—a tall Stilton, bound round with a napkin. The holes were undeniable.

‘It’ll be the mice that have done it,’ said she.

‘The mice?’ said Elsie ; ‘nonsense, Bella ! it is cut with a knife. Look at it yourself.’

Bella gloomily regarded it.

‘It was just the mice,’ she repeated.

‘It was not the mice,’ said Elsie warmly ;

‘would the mice eat the napkin and leave the cheese? I just ask you that, Bella!’

‘It was nothing but the mice,’ said Bella doggedly.

‘And I say it was *not* the mice,’ cried Elsie. ‘Do not let me hear you say it was the mice again.’

Bella took up the cheese, examined it all round, and set it down again.

‘The mice,’ said she.

‘Bella,’ said Elsie, who felt now that her dignity was at stake, ‘I forbid you to say the mice. I forbid you to use that word. If you say mice again, I shall be obliged to part with you. Mend that napkin and put it on lower down.’

With these words Elsie walked majestically away, not venturing to turn round again, although she fancied she still heard ‘mice’ murmured faintly behind her.

Her next visit was to the kitchen, which was one of the most cheerful rooms in the house, so clean and fresh and bright was it; for Marjorie prided herself on never letting

a speck of dust remain anywhere; and her brass pans shone like gold, ranged along the warm-coloured buff walls. The stone floor was freshly strewn with sand; and Marjorie herself looked the picture of neatness in her white apron and 'mutch' and little tartan shawl.

Marjorie was a calm woman—a great comfort in that household. A little too apt, perhaps, to look at the dark side of things; but Elsie placed great reliance on her judgment in all household matters. Things might be better than Marjorie represented them, but never could be worse: with this view she was wont to console herself if anything went wrong.

'I thoct upon the hen for your denner the day,' said Marjorie, taking up a fat fowl from the dresser. 'Ye like a hen whiles, and the Captain, he'll be content wi't. I'm thinkin' we'll need a sheep killed gin next week.'

'Next week—yes,' said Elsie, sitting down on the edge of the table. 'Marjorie—the

Captain's marriage is to be the end of next week, and I am going away before that—away to England.'

'Keep me!' exclaimed Marjorie, as she laid down the hen and looked at her young mistress with concern. 'And will ye be lang awa', Miss Elsie?'

'I do not know; I may be,' answered Elsie rather sadly. 'I am going to stay with my grand-uncle, General Lindsay. Do you remember him and Mrs. Lindsay? were they not once here?'

'Ay, I mind them fine. Ye were a wee bairn then, Miss Elsie.'

'What were they like, Marjorie?'

'The General was a weel-fa'ard gentleman; the leddy, she took ill wi' the weet roads—there had been an awfu' heap o' rain. She had a maid—Parkins they ca'ed her—sic daft-like names thae English have. Eh! the fykes o' that woman! The leddy was a wee thing parteeklar hersel', but Parkins——!'

Here Marjorie paused, words failing to express what she had suffered from the

peculiar fancies of the English lady's-maid.

‘Aweel,’ she resumed after a few minutes’ silence, ‘I’ll be vexed when ye gang, Miss Elsie; it’ll be an unco change to me. But maybe ye’ll be happier awa’, and the Captain, he’ll no be needin’ ye sae sair.’

‘She, too, thinks I had better go,’ thought Elsie. But aloud she only added, ‘And you know, Marjorie, I want to have everything in order before—Mrs. Ross—comes; that will be next week. I was speaking to Bella just now—really she is provoking. She says there are mice, which eat the napkins.’

‘Esie-bell?’ said Marjorie with a sort of sniff (they did not get on together); ‘I was thinkin’ maybe ye had discorded,’ she added soothingly. ‘Hoot! never heed Esie-bell. She’s that dour—Mice? there’s nae mice. Make us thankful if there’s nae rottens.’

‘Oh, I hope not!’ said Elsie anxiously. ‘It would be dreadful if rats got into the house. Do you think they will, Marjorie?’

‘I doubt they’ll win in, through time,’

replied Marjorie with resignation. 'The new hen-house is just useless wi' them—a perfect riddle o' holes, the floor o't. Would ye please to look at it, Miss Elsie?'

Elsie thought this report so serious that she started at once to investigate, taking her little dog with her.

It may be necessary to give the reader a short sketch of Hans, who has been so often mentioned, and on whom Elsie lavished so much affection. She had long wished to possess a dachshund, and her governess, Fräulein Meyer, had good-naturedly brought one straight from Germany for her, about a year before.

Elsie was charmed with the little soft brown puppy, and bestowed on him the name of 'the discreet Hans,' after the sagacious hero of Grimm's tale. But Hans did not turn out quite the pure-bred badger-hound that her fancy had pictured. He did not, indeed, grow big, and he had a beautiful little head, with large intelligent brown eyes; but his curiously misshapen body and enor-

mous tail, which, in moments of excitement, swelled out like that of an enraged cat, gave him a most comical appearance. Hans was not a brave animal, though he was fond of sport in a small way. He was afraid of men, cattle, horses, dogs, cats, and poultry ; and Elsie, who was a prey to constant anxiety on his account, used to spend much time and thought in shielding him from the dangers to which he believed himself exposed ; as well as in preventing him from injuring his health by over-eating. He was, however, devotedly attached to his little mistress, and would sit gazing at her for hours, keeping his large tail outstretched ready to wag at the slightest glance or sign.

Let it not be supposed that Elsie took him to the hen-house to kill the rats ; nothing could have been further from the thoughts of either of them ; but she seldom went anywhere without him, except when she rode or drove, as then his short legs could not carry him far with any speed.

Elsie and Hans had not far to go, as a

small strip of shrubbery was all that separated the farmyard from the house ; but Elsie chose a somewhat circuitous route to the hen-house, threading her way cautiously amongst the stacks, and looking out for her secret foe, the gander. This valiant bird, whose two wives were at present sitting on eggs, was ready to fly at all comers, and nourished a particular enmity against Hans, whom he conceived to have malicious designs upon his family. Elsie did not care to risk an open encounter with him, so she would dodge him round the stacks 'on Hans's account,' she always told herself when she did so ; though what she would have done if Hans had not been there may be questioned.

To-day she passed the stacks in safety, and had almost reached the hen-house door, when the well-known pattering sound behind her made her turn round in alarm. The gander had found his enemy intent upon a haddock's head, and promptly bore down upon him with outstretched neck and flapping wings. In a moment Elsie had snatched up

Hans (who, with great presence of mind, kept hold of the fish's head), and fled ignominiously, never stopping till she had put the whole stackyard between her and her pursuer.

‘Hans, do you *wish* to be destroyed?’ said she breathlessly, as she put him down. ‘For the gander will do it some day, even if the master does not.’

A visit to the hen-house was now out of the question. ‘Why should we expose ourselves again to his fury?’ Elsie said. ‘I’ll wait till one o’clock, when he has his dinner. Come, Hans, we will go into the garden.’

The garden lay to the back of the house, at the side farthest from the sea, and was surrounded by a wall of red sandstone. The house itself was of this material, as were most of the buildings in that district. It was small, square, and very narrow for its height; at each corner was a little round turret like a pigeon-house. It looked bare and gaunt enough, yet not unpicturesque when viewed from the sea, from which it was only separated

by some broken ground thinly planted with shrubs, shrivelled and browned by the east wind. The walls of the house were very thick, and within the rooms were small and rather bare of furniture. The drawing-room was wainscoted and painted white : it looked, as did all the best rooms in the house, to the north, for the sake of the really beautiful view of the little bay and the hills beyond.

Over the mantelpiece hung the portrait of Elsie's mother, which has been already mentioned ; the only picture in the room, except a few black silhouettes of old gentlemen with pigtails. The walls of the dining-room, however, were well covered with Ross ancestors ; and over nearly every door in the house a stag's head and horns was fastened. The little entrance hall likewise bristled with these trophies ; which were used as pegs on which to hang hats, caps, and greatcoats in various stages of dilapidation. In one corner stood the Laird's stick and spud, in another Elsie kept her gardening tools.

It was here, after an hour's lingering in

the garden, that Elsie stopped short, struck by the sight of a strange hat and umbrella, and, a minute later, Bella met her in the passage. 'Please, ma'am, Mr. Macrae is here, and the Captain has ordered luncheon at one o'clock,' said she primly.

'Tiresome man!' thought Elsie; 'but, at any rate, I cannot go to the hen-house this day.' She went to the drawing-room to put the bunch of pale late-flowering daffodils she had gathered in water, and when the luncheon-bell rang, was joined by her father and Mr. Macrae, the family lawyer.

Elsie had known the latter from her childhood, and looked upon him as a sort of necessary evil. He had a red face, reddish whiskers, a loud cheerful voice, and an excellent opinion of himself; he was nevertheless a capital man of business, and very useful to the Laird, by whom he was much esteemed.

'How do you do, Mr. Macrae?' Elsie said, giving him her hand, not without a certain little air of condescension. 'I hope Mrs. Macrae is well.'

‘She’s well, I thank you, Miss Ross,’ returned Mr. Macrae. ‘I hope I see you well. I hear you are about to leave us—to wing your flight, as one may say, southwards. Yes! yes! England’s a fine country.’

‘I am sure it is,’ said Elsie, ignoring the first part of this speech. ‘And much warmer, I suppose, than here, though this is not a backward season.’

‘The vegetation,’ said Mr. Macrae, ‘is indeed pretty well advanced. The grass parks are commencing to asschool an appearance of verdure. Your fields, Captain, I see, are all sown, with the exception of the turnips. Lord Ochil was mentioning to me, last time I saw him, that his carrot crop had not been such a failure last year.’

‘No one but a fool would have tried to grow carrots on a clay soil,’ growled the Laird. ‘I saw them—eaten by worms and insects and all sorts of devils. I wouldn’t have given his carrots to one of my pigs.’

Mr. Macrae turned again to Elsie after this

slight rebuff, adapting his conversation to her feminine mind; for he prided himself especially upon his politeness to ladies, his elegant language, and correct pronunciation.

‘The burrds are at present very melodious,’ he observed, as a blackbird’s fluty note came in through the open window. ‘I believe, Miss Ross, you are partial to these little warblers.’

‘Yes,’ replied Elsie, ‘and the thrushes were singing beautifully this morning. They are not so scarce as they used to be.’

‘I am not precisely aware,’ said Mr. Macrae, ‘what note the thrush emits. In England, I am told, the nightingales render the woods vocal.’

‘Will you take some cheese?’ said the Laird impatiently.

‘I thank you, Captain—I will trouble Miss Ross for a little more of her shooperior pudding.’

Elsie thought that luncheon would never come to an end, but at length the Laird

dismissed her to prepare for her ride, and not keep the pony waiting. She was soon ready, but before starting she committed Hans, with much solemnity, to the care of Janet, admonishing her to keep her eye constantly upon him. 'Be sure he doesn't eat the hens' meat, and, above all, keep him from the pigs' pail!' were her parting words. 'Bella has more sense than Janet,' she reflected as she ran downstairs. 'He might have been safer with her; but after the mice, I don't choose to ask a favour of Bella to-day.'

The Laird and Mr. Macrae were standing at the door, where Elsie's handsome brown pony was already waiting, held by Jamie, the stable-boy.

'Allow me to assist you, Miss Ross,' said Mr. Macrae, coming forward. 'Your horse appears a little restive.'

The pony, indeed, was pawing the ground wildly, as he had a trick of doing when first brought out. Mr. Macrae kept well out of the way of his heels, but Elsie was on in a

moment, and after a few plunges he started quietly enough.

‘Miss Ross is a fine equestrian, I perceive,’ were the last words she heard as she rode off.

CHAPTER III.

‘This night is my departing night,
For here nae langer must I stay ;
There’s neither friend nor foe of mine
But wishes me away.’

ELSIE thoroughly enjoyed her ride that afternoon. She rode slowly, for it was such a sweet spring day, and she wanted to think and look about her. She had always had a feeling for natural beauty, but never till now, when she was about to leave it, had the scenery around her seemed so lovely. She trotted gently first over a bare stretch of road, then, as it entered a small wood, she pulled up to a walk.

A slight breeze was blowing off the sea ; it made a soft hushed sound amongst the fir-trees, which mingled pleasantly with the cooing of the wood-pigeons. A month later

the wood would be green with tall ferns, but the fronds had scarcely yet begun to uncurl their brown balls, and the withered leaves about their roots gave the ground a russet shade.

The sun lit up the red stems of the Scotch firs, and flickered here and there in spots upon the mossy stones and patches of brown heather. At the farther edge of the wood there was a strip of young plantation, and beyond that again a sort of open moor, dotted with 'whins' and broom-bushes. The small birds were busy in the young spruce firs; Elsie could distinguish their different notes—the chaffinch's loud cheery song, the softer call-note of the green 'lintie,' the plaintive chant of the yellow-hammer. Out upon the moor she heard the sound she loved to listen to—the wild spring cry of the curlew, beginning slowly with long notes, then growing louder and quicker, and dying away in widening circles of sound.

Beyond the moor the character of the soil changed; it had a colder look, and the

ploughed fields were almost gray where the sun had dried the surface, quite different from the 'red land' about Rossie. The road wound uphill, and at the top Elsie stood still to look. Below her, in the hollow, lay the little gray town of St. Ethernans, the massive old church, with its square tower and short steeple, rising up in the midst. The sea beyond was of a deep bright blue, and only a line of white surf told of the last night's storm. The day was clear, and she could plainly see the lighthouse on the other side of the bay, and the patches of snow still shining on the far-off hills.

'Why do I go away?' thought Elsie. 'Yet I must, no one seems to want me here. Shall I ever come back and look at those hills again? I will say good-bye to them now, I do not feel as if I ever should.'

The tears rushed to her eyes and blinded her; she sat still without troubling to wipe them away, until the sound of wheels made her start.

'How stupid I am,' she thought; 'it will

never do to be found crying on the public road.'

The pony pricked up his ears at the sound of the advancing gig ; he rather liked standing still, unless desired to do so for any special purpose, but he could not endure wheels behind him, so Elsie started off at a brisk trot. She did not pursue the road to St. Ethernans, but turned down the first opening to the right, a cart track leading to the farm of Nether Bogie, which was rented by Mr. John Webster, brother to Euphemia, the Laird's destined bride.

The farmsteading was rather a large one, situated like an island amidst an ocean of ploughed fields ; without a tree, except one solitary, wind-blown ash. It boasted a tall chimney, however, and there were still a good many stacks. Close to the front door was a row of hen-coops, each containing a brood of newly-hatched turkeys ; for Miss Euphemia was a noted hen-wife, and her turkeys were always the earliest in the country. Elsie dismounted, and looked at

the little black and gray chicks with interest ; then rang the front-door bell. It was presently answered by a tall, red-haired, awkward-looking girl, who blushed and grinned shyly as she recognised her visitor.

‘How are you, Agnes?’ said Elsie. ‘Is Euphemia in?’

‘Yes ; just come in, please,’ replied Agnes.

‘The pony——?’

‘I’ll take him round.’

Elsie went into the dining-room, where the family usually sat ; the windows were closely shut, and a peculiar pungent odour, as of boiled cabbage, pervaded it. The furniture was black horse-hair ; in the middle of the room was a large round table, covered with a green cloth ; on it stood a cut-glass water decanter, with a tumbler reversed over it. Around this central ornament a few books and a photograph album were arranged ; underneath it was a woollen mat with a yellow and crimson border. On the mantelpiece, which was painted green to represent malachite, were some large foreign shells,

and two or three clay pipes were scattered about. In a big chair by the fire an old woman was dozing, wrapped up in shawls; she did not look up or speak, and Elsie trod softly for fear of disturbing her.

Agnes entered in a few minutes, followed by Euphemia. The latter was older by some years than her sister; less awkward, and without the red hair. She had what might be called a comely face, and looked the essence of good temper, but her incessant simper was to Elsie almost more irritating than Agnes's open-mouthed stare.

'I hope you've not had to wait, Miss Ross,' said Euphemia as she came forward. 'I'm sure I take it very kind—such a long ride as you've had.'

'I wanted to come and see you, Euphemia,' Elsie replied. 'I suppose it will be the last time before you come to Rossie; but I shall be away when you come, for I am going to England.'

'Dear me!' exclaimed Euphemia, 'such a long way! and all by yourself, Miss Ross!'

‘You ought not to call me Miss Ross now, Euphemia.’

Elsie felt a little shy, which had the effect of making her manner very stately. Euphemia simpered and looked down.

‘I’m sure,’ said she, ‘you’re very condescending.’

‘How is Mrs. Blair?’ asked Elsie, violently changing the subject.

‘Oh, pretty well to-day. Agnes, turn Granny’s chair. Granny, here’s Miss Ross asking for you.’

Agnes went behind the wheeled chair and launched her grandmother at Elsie, who retreated, feeling sorry she had introduced the subject.

‘Are you keeping better, Mrs. Blair?’ she said, taking one of the limp old hands. But the poor old woman only grunted feebly, and was soon replaced in her corner by Agnes.

Elsie then proceeded to explain to the sisters about her proposed departure; she could discern through all Euphemia’s sighs and expressions of regret that her absence

would be a relief to her, while Agnes gazed at her in silent wonder. She rose at last to go, declining all offers of refreshment on the plea that she was going to have tea with Aunt Grizel.

‘But a bit of cake! you’ll not refuse a bit of cake—and a glass of ginger wine!’

Agnes hurried off, and returned with the cake-basket—a startling piece of plate, on which were displayed alternate squares of shortbread and slices of pound-cake. Elsie said she never drank wine, but, not to seem ungracious, she took a bit of the shortbread, and was sitting down again patiently, when old Mrs. Blair woke up and began to glare with frightened eyes round the room.

‘Wha’s that?’ she exclaimed, suddenly fixing them on Elsie. ‘The Lord preserve us! wha’s that?’

‘It’s Miss Ross that has called, Granny,’ said Euphemia. ‘Surely you know Miss Ross.’

The old lady seemed pacified for the moment, but the alarm in her eyes revived

as she turned them on Agnes. 'And that?' she said, pointing to the latter with a shaking hand, 'wha's that?'

'Dear, dear me, Grannie!' said Euphemia, with meek reproach. 'You're very dazed like to-day! D'ye not know our Agnes?'

'She's like a haddock,' observed Mrs. Blair, sinking back. 'She's very like a haddock.'

'Dear, dear, dear!' sighed Euphemia again. 'I hope you'll excuse her, Miss Ross. She's very stupid-like to-day.'

Elsie was making heroic efforts to be grave and sympathetic. Agnes's expression at the moment was, she thought, exactly that of a haddock, and could not have been more happily described.

'Poor Mrs. Blair!' she said. 'I am sorry she is not so well. Good-bye, Euphemia, good-bye, Agnes.' She shook hands with each of them, and went up to the old lady.

'Ye're a bonny crater,' said Mrs. Blair with unexpected intelligence. 'I wish ye weel.'

Elsie felt thankful when she was once more on horseback, and in the fresh air. She set off at a quick pace, and soon reached St. Ethernans. Her aunt's house stood a little apart, at the end of the long straggling street ; it had a small plot of ground in front, planted with thorn and laburnum bushes, and a good-sized 'back-green' behind. Elsie left her pony at the inn a little farther on, and walked into the house unannounced ; her aunt had seen her pass and was expecting her. She received Elsie affectionately, and the girl found it a relief to pour out the history of the last days' doings.

Miss Griselda Ross was a lady of considerable dignity of manner ; tall and thin, and wonderfully erect, in spite of her seventy-eight years of age. Her features were strongly marked, her blue eyes still keen and bright. The fashion of her dress never varied, a black gown and large silk apron, a band of black velvet across her forehead, and a white cap with lavender ribbons tied under her chin.

The little parlour was very formal and plain, but clean, fresh, and airy. To Elsie it was as familiar and home-like as the drawing-room at Rossie ; she regularly spent her Sundays there, and would come as often as she could to see her Aunt Grizel on week-days also. The stiff little room had looked exactly the same as long as she could remember, only in summer the moreen window-curtains gave place to muslin ones, which were put up punctually at the 'May term,' and taken down again at Martinmas. There was a bookcase, in one shelf of which Elsie was allowed to keep her Sunday books, and a corner cupboard contained some old china, and other curiosities and relics, dear to the old lady's heart.

Elsie had sat down in her accustomed position on the rug, and had thrown her hat, gloves, and riding-whip on a chair, a piece of untidiness which for once passed unproved.

Miss Grizel heard of her approaching departure without surprise, indeed with evident approbation.

‘Well, my dear,’ said she, ‘it is right that you should learn to know your own people. I was telling Robert—your father—last time he was here, that you need a change, and there cannot be a better time than now.’

‘Papa said that I would be better away,’ said Elsie, and her lip quivered a little. ‘Aunt Grizel, do you know I have got a feeling—a presentiment, that if I go to England I shall never come back—I shall never see Rossie again.’

She knelt on the rug as she said this, her clasped hands resting on her aunt’s knee; the old lady looked at her uneasily. Miss Grizel was a firm believer in presentiments, dreams, omens, and superstitions of all kinds, but she was not a person who would encourage a child in foolish fancies.

‘Hoots, my dear!’ she said almost roughly, ‘don’t take morbid fancies into your head. I never heard such nonsense in my life. You’re just tired—you’re as white as a clout. Tuts! what’s come over Elizabeth

with the tea?' She rose stiffly and went to the door.

'Eleezabeth! come away, Eleezabeth! haste ye with the tea! Miss Elsie's tired.'

'Why did I speak like that?' thought Elsie remorsefully. 'I ought not—Aunt Grizel is old, it does not do to put her out.' And a great longing came over the girl for some one she might speak to, who was not old like Miss Grizel, nor gruff like her father, nor doleful like Marjorie, some one she might talk to without fear of being reproved or misunderstood.

'Aunt Grizel, never mind the tea,' she said, rising and taking the old lady's hand. 'I am just a little tired, as you say. Sit down, and I will read you Aunt Caroline's letter.' The letter Elsie read was as follows:—

'It is with mingled feelings, my dear young niece, that I take up my pen to write to you. It is, indeed, impossible that *you* should remember *me*, but I can never forget seeing you, then a darling baby in your dear

mother's arms, on the occasion of my *first* and *only* visit to the country of your birth! I have heard but lately that your father is about to form new ties, and, as he will no longer *exclusively* need your administering love, your dear uncle and I now *feel* that the time has come when we may induce you to leave your Scottish home, and find a resting-place under our roof, where, I need not say, you will receive a true WELCOME! Your father, to whom your dear uncle and I beg to offer our kind remembrances, will not, I trust, disapprove of our proposal, as he formerly gave us hopes of *claiming* you at some future time; and we shall, dear Elspeth, anticipate your arrival, *as soon* as he may deem it convenient.

‘It is our earnest wish that your sojourn with us may be both pleasant and profitable; and my hope and prayer, dear child, is, that our intercourse may be *fraught* with blessings of the highest kind.—I am, my dear niece, ever your affectionate aunt and godmother,

‘CAROLINE B. LINDSAY.’

Elsie read this letter through without comment, giving the proper expression as well as she could, and then looked up to try and read her Aunt Grizel's face ; but the old lady was busied with the tea-things, and, outwardly at least, paid no attention.

‘ Here, child ! bring in a chair to the table, and put in the cream yourself. What sort of tea-bread has she brought ? Help yourself to a scone, or see ! there are cookies.’

Elsie helped herself to a scone. Aunt Grizel's tea was strong and good, and under its influence her spirits rose visibly, and she dismissed the gloomy presentiments from her mind.

‘ Do tell me about Aunt Caroline,’ she said. ‘ You must know her, Aunt Grizel, she must be quite unlike any one I ever saw.’

‘ I haven't seen them since they came to Rossie that time she speaks of ; I used to know your grand-uncle, the General, very well long ago. He had a great work with your mother—she was his favourite niece, he used to say.’

‘Tell me about him then, Aunt Grizel.’

‘There’s not much to tell about him. He was thought very handsome in his youth ; and he was always a kind good creature. He didn’t marry till he was quite a middle-aged man. As to your Aunt Caroline, she’s a lively, agreeable woman. To be sure she had always her fancies and her trennies, but she’s a good wife to him.’

‘Papa says she has got a religious craze, but he always says that of any one who is at all pious.’

‘Your Aunt Caroline is a good woman, my dear,’ said Miss Grizel shortly. ‘Always bear that in mind. She has a great deal of manner, and she is one of your Frenchified kind of women ; but I never fell out with her for my part. I just let her say her say.’

‘I wonder if I should fall out with Euphemia, if I lived with her,’ said Elsie. ‘Papa seemed to think I might. He said he couldn’t expect us to agree. Oh, Aunt Grizel ! what could have made him want to marry her ?’

‘Your father was too long of marrying, my dear,’ said Aunt Grizel oracularly. ‘He put off and put off; and when men do that, Elsie, either they end by never marrying at all, or they just think that anybody will do. We may be thankful it’s a good girl like Euphemia Webster that he’s taken.’

‘But she’s so stupid, Aunt Grizel! She is sure to provoke him in time.’

‘Euphemia is not stupid, my dear,’ said Aunt Grizel reprovingly. ‘She’s the best housewife in the country; she makes excellent jelly; she always has the first chickens and the best turkeys; and look at her butter!—it’s beautiful! And then such a good sister as she is to her brother and Agnes, and so kind and dutiful to her poor old grandmother. She’s a very superior girl, Elsie; it’s only very much to be lamented that she’s not in a higher rank of life, and that she comes of a Radical family—and, worse than all, she’s Free Kirk. That comes of putting off!’

‘Is it worse to be Free Kirk than not to be a lady?’ asked Elsie doubtfully.

‘Hoots!’ said Aunt Grizel. ‘Ring the bell, Elsie, if you’re done.’

The subject of Euphemia being thus dismissed, the conversation turned upon Elsie’s journey and the necessary arrangements. It was settled that it would be best for her to break her journey in Edinburgh, and to stay a couple of days there with old friends of her mother’s, a Mrs. and Miss Ferguson. An hour soon passed; and, after promising to spend Sunday with her aunt as usual, Elsie set off home.

CHAPTER IV.

‘Then up bespak his brother John,
Says, “Ye’ve done us meikle wrang, O ;
Ye’ve married ane far below our degree,
A mock to a’ our kin, O.”’

MISS GRIZEL could not settle down either to her stocking-knitting that evening, or to her reading of good books. She got out of her arm-chair, and paced up and down the room ; she undid the shutter, and looked out into the quiet street, then came back to her chair, put on her spectacles again and tried to read, but presently took them off, and laid them on the table beside her with a sigh.

‘I doubt if I’ve altogether done my duty by that child,’ she said to herself. ‘I should maybe have stayed on at Rossie ; but who would have thought Robert would be so long of marrying ? And it was hard to bear,

there's no doubt of that. To go and engage thon foreign woman for Elsie, and never tell me! But I fear that's pride. She's grown up a fine creature, but it's not through the guiding of me, Grizel Ross. Lord forgive me!'

It may be doubted whether the old lady had quite just cause for all this self-reproach. Her position had been rather a difficult one. She had left her little house in St. Ethernans to nurse Elsie's mother through her last illness; and after her death Miss Grizel remained on at Rossie, keeping house for her nephew, as she had done before his marriage.

Captain Ross seemed to take this as a matter of course; and as time went on, his aunt felt it necessary to come to some understanding with him.

'Robert,' said she one day, 'I have been thinking that I have perhaps stopped long enough with you.'

'I thought you were living here,' replied Robert. 'Better sell your house in St. Ethernans.'

‘But, Robert, if you were ever to turn your thoughts to marrying again—which without doubt it is your duty to do—it would not be my place to remain.’

Robert looked out of the window without speaking. ‘You could please yourself,’ he at length suggested.

‘But if my house were sold,’ said poor Miss Grizel, relapsing into Scotch, ‘I couldna win in.’

Her nephew apparently thought that this was a trite observation, which needed no reply, for he made none, and Miss Grizel did not know how to pursue the subject.

‘Then about Elsie,’ she said after a short pause. ‘She is getting too old for a nurse—she is nearly six.’

‘Can a child of six read and write?’ inquired Robert.

‘Elsie can’t read, the monkey! She ought to, but she will not learn with the nurse. It’s time she had a governess.’

Robert gazed at his aunt for some time with an impenetrable countenance, then

walked out of the room. A few minutes later Miss Grizel saw him from the window digging up thistles in the field with his spud, as though he had no other object in life.

‘Mercy! what use is it speaking to Robert?’ she said to herself. ‘He takes no more heed to anything you say than a graven eemage. There he is, away plowtering in the wet, and’ll come in without a dry thread on him! *That’ll* not learn Elsie to read, nor yet provide a house for me.’

Some little time after this the Laird suddenly observed at breakfast, ‘I’ve got a what-do-you-call-it for Elsie.’

‘A what, Robert?’ exclaimed Miss Grizel, in great astonishment.

‘A German one,’ continued Robert tranquilly.

‘You don’t mean a governess?’ said Miss Grizel. ‘Oh, Robert! and never to tell me! and me been hunting one high and low for the last three weeks! Have you engaged her?’

‘Coming to-morrow afternoon,’ replied Robert.

‘Well, I wash my hands of you!’ said Miss Grizel, rising in wrath. ‘You’ll just ruin your own child, and I had better go away and leave you, since I am to have no say in her bringing up.’

The Laird seemed a little disconcerted. ‘Better think it over,’ he said.

‘I just cannot abide thae foreigners,’ said Miss Grizel. ‘I’ll go back to St. Ethernans at the term.’

‘Please yourself, then,’ returned her nephew.

Miss Grizel’s conscience smote her a good deal after this; she was conscious of having lost her temper, and she greatly dreaded leaving little Elsie, who was her chief delight and pride. She would gladly have remained, had the Laird given her the least encouragement to do so; but he seemed to consider the matter settled, and pride prevented her making any further overtures. The following ‘Whitsunday term,’ therefore, found her installed in her little house at St. Ethernans, which she never afterwards left.

Miss Grizel did not, however, at all cease to concern herself with her little niece's upbringing. In spite of her aversion to foreigners, she could not continue to dislike Fräulein Meyer, who proved to be a sensible, cheerful person, possessed of much cleverness and tact.

'Still one never knows,' Miss Grizel would say. 'These Germans may have a queer-like religion; and as to Robert with his godless ways, *he'll* take no heed of the child. He might let her go to the Free Kirk, or to no kirk at all, for what I know.'

So it came to pass that Elsie's Sundays were always spent with her aunt. They went together to the little Episcopal Church as often as there was service there, which was only on alternate Sundays, as one clergyman had to do duty between it and Lord Ochil's private chapel at Drumsheugh. The church itself was curiously small and dark, and looked outside like any ordinary dwelling-house, except that it had an arched doorway and latticed windows. It was a remnant of

the old nonjuring days, when it was criminal for a Scotch Episcopal clergyman to read the service to a congregation of more than five persons, and meetings were held in secret. Inside, the church was appropriately fitted up, and a small organ had been added, but no enlargement of the building had been thought necessary, as the congregation was very poor, consisting chiefly of the fisher folk, many of whom in that part of Scotland are Episcopalians. On the Sundays when there was no service there, Elsie and her governess went to the parish church, whilst Miss Grizel sat at home and read the prayers to herself. 'It was not for the likes of her,' she would remark, 'to go to thae places.' Not that she thought it wrong to attend a Presbyterian place of worship; on the contrary, she quite approved of Elsie doing so, and she had a great respect for the worthy minister, Dr. Cleghorn, and his wife; but she was so thoroughly conservative in all her instincts that she liked to keep up even the memory of old prejudices and traditions.

After service Elsie dined with Aunt Grizel, and then underwent a sort of catechising; she had to repeat the collect for the day, the Church catechism, one of the Scottish paraphrases, and the names of the books of the Old and New Testaments in their order, both backwards and forwards; which last exercise was regarded by Aunt Grizel as indispensable to her spiritual welfare. After this, she was allowed to read, or to do what she pleased, until tea, or until Fräulein Meyer, who had meanwhile been passing the time with her friend Mrs. Cleghorn, should think fit to appear and convey her home. After Elsie's confirmation the religious exercises were discontinued, but still her Sundays were spent with her aunt. No wonder Miss Grizel was restless and troubled that evening; she had schooled herself to believe that Elsie's departure was the best thing that could happen under the circumstances, but it was like losing the light of her eyes to part with the girl. One of her maxims, however, was that the young should

be taught to think themselves of no importance to their elders, so she would show no outward sign of regret when Elsie bade her good-bye.

‘If Robert had only taken my advice and married ten years ago—but he was always a thrawn creature,’ she said to herself. ‘What ailed him at Margaret Ferguson? But what is done is done, it is just a dispensation of Providence, and all is ordered for the best.’ With this pious reflection, rather doubtfully uttered, however, Aunt Grizel betook herself to bed.

CHAPTER V.

‘What I ha’e done through lack of wit
I never, never can reca’;
I trust you’re a’ my friends as yet,
Good-night, and joy be with you a’.’

ELSIE’S few last days at Rossie were fast slipping away, and some of her farewell visits had already been paid. She had none to make amongst those of her own class, for her only friends in the neighbourhood, Lord and Lady Ochil, at Drumsheugh, were then absent, to her great regret. For the last year or two, indeed, she had scarcely seen them, except on the Sundays when they came to St. Ethernans to church, as the Laird had unluckily taken offence at Lord Ochil for some trifling cause, and difficulties were apt to be raised whenever Elsie wished to visit them. It was a great loss to the

girl; she was a favourite with Lady Ochil, who was a kind motherly woman with a number of children of her own. 'A set of wild, ill-behaved brats,' Aunt Grizel called them, but Elsie delighted in a day or two spent at Drumsheugh amongst all the noise and merriment, and the change from the monotonous life at Rossie was very good for her.

About the farmsteading and in the cottages, however, Elsie had many friends, and she was careful that not one should be omitted in her round of visits.

'I wonder if there is anything they would like before I go,' she thought. So she ransacked all her little possessions for parting gifts, and where there were children she distributed pots of jam, despoiling the store-room without remorse.

'If Euphemia is so good at making jam, she may just make an extra quantity this year,' she remarked aside to Hans as she filled her baskets. Then she set off with her gifts, offering to every one as well her

pretty words of regret at leaving them. There was Sandy Duncan the grieve, and his wife, and the farm-labourers, with their wives and families, who lived in the row of cottages below the steading. There was Angus Cameron the shepherd, a Highlander from Lochaber, whose cottage stood all by itself amongst the fields of short grass near the sea. He had a wife too, and innumerable red-haired children, who were continually being caught trespassing in the woods by the Laird, and threatened by him with the utmost rigour of the law. There was Miss Petrie the seamstress, who inhabited quite a smart little house, and made clothes for the whole country-side. There was Tibbie Law the old post-woman, who brought out the letters and parcels daily, and whose cart and old white horse were constantly to be seen on the road between Rossie and St. Ethernans. She was invariably drunk, which was the chief cause of the late postal delivery; but nobody seemed to notice or regret this circumstance, and no harm, curiously enough, ever

befell either her or her letter-bags. And besides the people, there were all her favourite haunts to be visited; the 'den,' with its pretty little brown burn, whose banks were now yellow with primroses; the hollow ash-tree, where as a child she used to 'play at houses,' and which was still handsomely furnished with broken crockery; and the shore, which she liked best of all, but to which Hans was not so partial, owing to the absence of rabbits' holes.

Sandy Duncan and his wife stood at the door of their cottage watching Elsie as she went slowly home with her empty basket.

'Oor young leddy,' observed Sandy graciously, 'is railly an ornament till her sect.'

'She's a bonny crater and a gude,' answered his wife, wiping her eyes with her apron. 'And her no to get leave to bide in her ain mither's hoose! The Laird should tak' shame till himsel'—as he should. Siccan a mairriage!'

'Woman,' said Sandy, with his usual

oratorical wave of the hand, 'ye ha'e nae skel o' the law. The estate o' Rossie, wi' a' that appertains till't, would pass——'

'Hoot awa' wi' your estates, ye haverel!' replied Mrs. Duncan with ineffable scorn, yet willing to escape an argument to which she felt herself unequal. 'I'm awa' to the kye.'

So saying, she took up her milk-pails and departed, cutting short an oration which her husband was about to deliver on the whole genealogy of the Rossie family, combined with a homily on the impropriety of speaking evil of 'deegnities.'

It was Elsie's last day at home ; she was to start for Edinburgh the next morning, and she was sitting in the drawing-room writing labels, or 'libels' as Bella called them, for her boxes. The day was wet, and the Laird had been wandering disconsolately about the house, as his custom was, when the weather was unfavourable. He had now come into the drawing-room, and Elsie became aware that his eyes were fixed upon her as she

wrote. She looked up, pen in hand; the Laird eyed her fiercely.

‘Did you want anything, papa?’ she asked.

‘You’re a good creature, Elsie. Your mother was a good creature.’

With this remark, delivered with startling abruptness, the Laird bolted out of the room, leaving his daughter too entirely transfixed with astonishment to move or speak. He came back in a minute or two with a large blue envelope in his hand.

‘Have you money?’ he demanded.

‘Not enough for my journey, papa. I was going to ask you for some.’

‘Count that,’ said the Laird. Elsie obeyed.

‘But—— is not this more than I shall need?’

‘See that you travel respectably,’ said her father. ‘I hate your cheap excursions. I suppose you’ll take that idiot with you.’

‘That idiot’ meant Janet, as all the household knew.

‘Janet might see me into the train, papa, if you think it best ; but I shall not take anybody to England with me—except Hans, of course.’

‘You’re surely not going to take that brute to any decent house!’ said the Laird with well-feigned astonishment.

‘Aunt Caroline expects him,’ answered Elsie promptly. ‘I wrote to tell her he was coming.’

Her father glanced at Hans as he lay on the rug in front of the fire, his sides somewhat distended after a recent meal ; he moved the end of his tail deprecatingly on being looked at, and turned up the white of one eye.

‘Far better have it destroyed,’ murmured the Laird. But this was not said decisively or with authority, and Elsie knew that no further objection would be raised against Hans accompanying her. ‘Your uncle will pay your allowance regularly. I’ve made arrangements, and I’ve doubled it. If they don’t treat you well at that place you can come back.’

‘When shall I come back, papa?’

The Laird did not answer for a moment, then he turned to leave the room.

‘Come back when you please, of course,’ said he as he went away.

Elsie’s journey was rather a complicated one. She drove to St. Ethernans and thence took the ferry-boat, which crossed to Drumsheugh and back ‘every lawful day.’ From Drumsheugh the coach conveyed her to Crossbriggs Junction, where she had to wait half an hour for the train going south to Edinburgh. She dismissed Janet, as the coach returned immediately, and walked wearily up and down the long gusty platform, leading Hans by a little chain. A chill east wind was blowing, sweeping disconsolately through the draughty station, reddening the noses of the passengers and blowing dust into their eyes. Elsie could not help thinking how unlovely her fellow-creatures looked under these circumstances; the men standing about in groups discussing the price of barley or some knotty point in politics, and clearing their

throats from time to time with unnecessary vehemence. The women mostly looked cold and careworn, standing huddled together in knots of two or three, or sitting on the benches, each grasping several baskets, bundles, or babies, as the case might be ; while one or two damsels, arrayed in what they were pleased to call ' Pairis faashions,' walked up and down arm in arm with a jaunty air.

The half-hour had lengthened out into three-quarters ; at last the porter rang a huge bell just behind Elsie's ear, and the train came thundering up. She took Hans in her arms, and was, in her anxiety, about to struggle into a smoking compartment, when ' Allow me, Miss Ross,' said a voice close to her, and Elsie recognised the well-known accents of Mr. Macrae. ' Permit me to assist you—you will find the next carriage more commodious.'

' Oh, thank you, Mr. Macrae,' said Elsie, glad to see him for the first time in her life, as he put her and her possessions into the carriage.

‘And there is your canine favourite. Poor little fellow!’ said Mr. Macrae, attempting to pat Hans, who was ungrateful enough to reply with a growl. ‘Vigilant as ever, I see!’ he continued magnanimously. ‘A capital guardian, Miss Ross, first-class!’

‘It is very bad of him to growl at his friends,’ said Elsie, who felt quite warmed and cheered by the friendly voice and manner. ‘Thank you so much—good-bye!’ and the train moved slowly off, leaving Mr. Macrae standing on the platform flourishing his hat with much grace.

Once more Elsie caught sight of the bay and the hills before the railway line took a turn to the west. She looked out for them anxiously. It had been cloudy when she crossed the ferry, so that the higher hills were hidden, and to the fanciful girl there came a thought that she would look upon this view for the last time, and that its aspect, whether dark or bright, would be a portent of her future life. She had expected the scene to

be gloomy and threatening ; but when it came into sight she could scarcely repress a cry of wonder.

Before her lay a milk-white sea ; the heavy cloud-masses had rolled back and now hung over the hills, which shaded in colour from blue-black to violet. As she looked, the clouds overhead parted a little, and a ray of light struck down upon the white water, changing it to pale gold. It was a strange and beautiful sight, and one which Elsie never forgot ; but a moment later the train dashed into a tunnel, and she saw the sea no more.

CHAPTER VI.

‘ Oh ! Leezie, lass, ye maun ken little
If sae be ye dinna ken me,
For I am Lord Ronald Macdonald,
A chieftain of high degree.’

IN the drawing - room of No. — Regent Place, Edinburgh, two ladies were sitting, a mother and daughter. The room was evidently prepared for company ; the chairs and sofas had been stripped of their chintz covers, and appeared in all the glory of crimson plush and brass nails. They looked almost as if they missed their covering, and were uneasily conscious of their bare legs and arms. Most of the furniture had been pushed back against the wall, leaving a large empty space in the middle of the floor, which might be very necessary when the room was crowded with guests, but, in the meantime,

presented a somewhat waste and desert appearance. In the inner drawing-room, beyond the large folding door, a table was laid for tea. Sugar and cream were there, and cakes of different sorts, also vast numbers of teacups and saucers, but nothing hot had as yet made its appearance. The polished hearth had been newly swept, and the fire made as small as it is possible for a fire to be.

‘Now they can come as soon as they like, Margaret,’ said Mrs. Ferguson, opening the window as she spoke, to let in a little more of the keen east wind. ‘I think the room is well aired.’

‘Dear me, yes, mother,’ said Margaret rather crossly, ‘it’s very cold.’

‘It’ll be hot enough before we’re done,’ said Mrs. Ferguson with a sigh.

‘I do think, mother,’ Margaret said, walking to the window and shutting it with a snap, ‘you could not have chosen a more awkward day for your tea-party. Elsie Ross will be here long before they’re all gone.’

‘Well, what does it matter?’ answered her mother. ‘She’ll just come in for a nice chat with a few friends.’

‘She’ll come in for cold tea, that’s certain,’ said Margaret. ‘But, hark! there’s the door-bell.’

Mrs. Ferguson smoothed out her silk dress, and looked around her with complacency; Margaret also summoned up a hospitable smile. Both ladies were fond of society and a little gossip, but their rather limited means prevented them from giving any very costly entertainments to their friends, and their style of living was, perhaps, a little old-fashioned. One or two *large* afternoon teas, as on the present occasion, and a great number of smaller ones, were usually the extent of their home gaieties during the season.

Margaret Ferguson could scarcely be called a *young* lady, though her manner and dress were youthful for her time of life, which might be thirty-five or thereabouts. She was still handsome and well-preserved; a

fine figure of a woman, her friends used to say of her. Her dark brown hair was still abundant, and she made the most of it; her eyes were also fine, and she could use them in a manner which was considered highly effective. She was fond too of a little showiness in dress, and wore that afternoon a gown of some brown material, relieved by trimmings of bright yellow silk; amber beads were round her neck, and at her throat were two or three of the star-shaped yellow daffodils then in flower. Mrs. Ferguson had been a beauty in her day, though few traces of it now remained. She was a stout, comfortable-looking lady, easy-going and good-humoured. She, like her daughter, was fond of ornament, but, in consideration of her widowed state, her dress was of black silk, adorned only with numerous jet beads and bugles.

The peals at the door-bell soon became incessant, and the room began to fill rapidly. Margaret's tea-table was surrounded by a circle of young men, with whom her good

looks and lively manner rendered her very popular. She made them useful in handing round cakes and cups of tea, and kept up a continual flow of talk and laughter in the inner room, towards which all the young people of the party were gradually attracted ; some of the girls talking to the young men of their acquaintance, others grouped together, confidentially discussing their partners at the last ball, or descanting upon the ugliness of their friends' clothes.

In the larger drawing-room, where Mrs. Ferguson presided, more serious subjects were under discussion. The younger married ladies drew together, and compared their children's ages and constitutions, or condoled with one another on the shortcomings of their servants ; while the elder matrons and spinsters were long since embarked on floods of church gossip, according to their different denominations ; varied by a little mild scandal, and some dissertations upon diseases.

Next to Mrs. Ferguson, in the chair of state, sat a large and ponderous lady in a

velvet mantle. There was, somehow, an appearance of wealth about her, which commanded every one's respect, and her opinion was listened to with deference. This lady belonged, in fact, to no less a family than the Stewarts of Knockbrichachan, and, having married Mr. Macdonald-Smith, a wealthy wine-merchant, there was no end to her importance, or to the respect which she inspired.

'I think,' said Mrs. Ferguson to this personage, 'I saw your carriage at the door of St. Barnabas' Church on Sunday afternoon.'

'I went to hear your new curate,' replied Mrs. Macdonald-Smith. 'He looks very emaciated, poor young man. Have you made his acquaintance?'

'He's scarcely to be seen out of the pulpit,' said Mrs. Ferguson, shaking her head. 'I asked him to his dinner a while ago, but no! he wasn't going out. I forget the reason—it was one of their church days, I think, when they stay in.'

‘Ah, well! very proper, I daresay,’ said Mrs. Macdonald-Smith. ‘Duties are different in different stations. Did you and your daughter go to the New Club ball, Mrs. Ferguson?’

‘Oh yes! we did, and very good it was. Margaret was dancing away—she never tires. A terrible want of gentlemen, though! I was quite sorry for the poor girls that got no dancing. There they were, poor things, standing round the wall thick! each with their programme in their hands, and never a partner to their name!’ And kind Mrs. Ferguson sighed deeply at the recollection of this moving spectacle.

‘By the bye, Mrs. Macdonald-Smith,’ she continued presently, ‘we are expecting a young friend this afternoon, who will make a sensation, I’m thinking, when she comes out. I’m not sure but what she’s a connection of yours—Elsie Ross of Rossie. She’s Helen Lindsay’s daughter—do you recollect *her*?’

‘Helen Lindsay? I remember her well, and a beautiful creature she was,’ said Mrs.

Macdonald-Smith, with more animation than she had hitherto displayed. 'You are quite right, Mrs. Ferguson, she *was* related to the Stewarts. Does her daughter inherit her good looks?'

'Well—she's a graceful creature,' said Mrs. Ferguson, considering. 'A mere slip of a thing, you know—wants filling out—but pretty, and a nice frank girl too. No awkward schoolgirl ways about her. Margaret thinks she'll be a beauty—I've not seen her for two years. It's almost time she was here,' she added, glancing at the clock on the chimney-piece.

'I hope you won't hurry away, Mrs. Macdonald-Smith,'—as that lady showed signs of moving,—'it will be a real pleasure to introduce her to you.'

By this time some of the guests had departed, and the rooms were becoming empty. Margaret still appeared engrossed in conversation, but all the time she kept a bright lookout, and she was the first to hear the door-bell which announced Elsie's arrival. In a

minute she was on the stair, and stood still to make sure that it was the expected guest, reflecting with some vexation that, after a long journey, Elsie's appearance would scarcely be calculated to make the impression she desired. 'And dressed in black, too, I declare, like a little nun,' she said half impatiently, as a slender dark figure emerged from the cab, leading a little brown dog by a chain.

'Well! Elsie dear,'—flying downstairs to meet her and kissing her warmly,—'how are you? Very tired after your journey? So you've brought your little dog—that's right! Trouble? not a bit! bring a whole kennel if you like. My dear child, we've got a tea-party. Come into this room a minute.'

She hastily drew the girl into a large bedroom on the ground-floor, filled with ladies' cloaks and wraps. 'You won't mind coming upstairs to see them for a little? They'll soon be gone.'

'If my clothes are good enough,' said Elsie doubtfully, rather anxious for an excuse not to appear.

‘You look very nice, dear. Take off your heavy jacket, and let me arrange your handkerchief. So! If only I had a flower to pin here! Ah! you’ve got one yourself, clever child!’ as Elsie offered her a bunch of dark velvety auriculas, which she had brought from home.

‘There! they look lovely against the cream-coloured handkerchief. Keep on your hat—it’s very becoming—now! Oh, the dog! Jo-an!’ she called—Elsie’s eyebrows went up in a little surprise—‘Jo-an!’ and one of the maids who had been carrying in the trunks appeared.

‘Here, Jo-an, is Miss Ross’s dog—give it some food, and keep it till the company’s gone. And—stop, Jo-an, don’t let it worry the cat. Come along, Elsie darling.’

Elsie submitted to be led to the drawing-room, feeling rather confused at the buzz of strange voices which greeted her ears. Margaret placed her in a chair by the tea-table, and glanced round her for a moment. ‘Well, Captain Foulis, *you* look very tired,’ she said,

addressing a young man who was leaning languidly against the door. 'Are you too exhausted to fetch me the tea-pot and kettle from the next room? They're by the fire.'

The young man seemed a trifle unwilling, but went obediently.

'He gives himself ridiculous airs,' whispered Margaret—'he's very well connected, though—and dances beautifully. Many thanks,' said she aloud, taking the things from him. 'You really deserve a reward. Let me introduce you to Miss Ross, Captain Foulis.'

Elsie looked round in vain for Mrs. Ferguson; but that lady, all unconscious of her arrival, was serenely prattling on to her friends in the larger room, whither Elsie had not yet been conducted. There was no help for it—she must drink her tea and make conversation for Captain Foulis; who, after pulling his moustache and gazing at the ceiling as if in thought, at length drew a chair close to her, and proceeded to make himself as agreeable as he knew how.

She overheard Margaret meanwhile giving warm invitations to several young people for a dance the following evening. 'Just a few couples, you know—nothing grand,' she said. 'Captain Foulis, I hope you will come if you've nothing better to do. Can you? at eight o'clock—just a small early affair.'

The well-connected one, after again consulting the ceiling, replied that he would leave it open, if she didn't mind. He did not exactly remember what his engagements were, but would 'put in an appearance' if he could. He then took leave, and Elsie said hastily, 'Margaret, where *is* Mrs. Ferguson?'

Margaret laughed, and led her into the next room. She was going to have teased her mother jestingly about her inattention to her guest, but the presence of Mrs. Macdonald-Smith awed her into decorum, and made even Mrs. Ferguson's kindly greeting a little stiffer than it would naturally have been. Elsie was presented to the great lady in due form; and the latter, after surveying her through her gold-rimmed eyeglass, was

condescending enough to discover that she possessed the form of eyebrow peculiar to the Stewarts of Knockbrichachan. 'Mine are exactly the same shape, my dear, you will observe,' said she. She then proceeded to examine Elsie as to her precise degree of relationship to that illustrious house, on which point she found her lamentably ignorant.

'And then they intermarried, my dear, with the Lindsays of Corinzean. That reminds me, Mrs. Ferguson, I have a letter from my good old friend, Mrs. Macdonald of Ardvoira. They are expecting the young heir to be down this summer; he is home from India on leave. A very fine youth, I am told.'

'Indeed?' said Mrs. Ferguson. 'He'll be Lord Corinzean too some day, will he not? Now attend, Elsie! this is your cousin, you know, only once removed. His father and your mother were first cousins.'

'His mother, Lady Eleanor, is married again,' said Mrs. Macdonald-Smith quickly, 'to a Mr. Fitzgerald—Irish extraction, I

fancy—and she has a younger son; not a Fitzgerald though—a Lindsay. There are several between young David Lindsay and the peerage, but he'll come to it through time. That is, humanly speaking, of course.'—A sigh. 'Those Corinzeans have no right to be long-lived.'

Elsie was tired, and felt no interest in the subject. She was familiar with the names, Ardvoira, Knockbrichachan, Corinzean (pronounced Coringan), as she had heard them from Aunt Grizel, who was also fond of genealogical research, and they had invariably wearied her very much. 'It is very hard,' thought she, 'that I should be annoyed with them here as well;' and great was her relief when Mrs. Macdonald-Smith departed, followed presently by the other guests.

The energetic Margaret now came bustling up.

'Well!' said she, 'I don't think it went off badly at all. Dear me! how tired you both look!'

Mrs. Ferguson had sunk back in her arm-chair, and, casting her company manners to the winds, was mopping her face and fanning herself with her pocket handkerchief.

‘Oh, my dears!’ said she, ‘what a day this has been! Oh me, but it’s warm! Margaret, open a bit o’ the window.’

‘Well, mother, go and lie down on your bed if you’re tired, and don’t get rheumatism. I’ll send Jo-an to set the room to rights. Elsie, come upstairs, dear child.’

She took Elsie to the room prepared for her; and, with real kindness, as she noticed the girl’s weary looks, attended to her wants, and made her promise to take ‘a good rest.’

Finally, she fetched Hans, whose delight at being restored to his mistress expressed itself in curious little squeaks, and in scampering round the room with his tail arched until he was quite exhausted, and had to lie down, panting.

CHAPTER VII.

‘Enter THAMES with two attendants.

Thames. Here I am, sir.

Puff. Very well, indeed ! See, gentlemen, there’s a river for you !

Sneer. But pray, who are those gentlemen in green with him ?

Puff. Those ?—those are his banks.

Sneer. His banks ?

Puff. Yes, one crowned with alders and the other with a villa—you take the allusions ?’

THIS was not by any means Elsie’s first visit to the Fergusons. She had spent a little time with them in Edinburgh nearly every year, and on former occasions had generally enjoyed herself very much. Margaret amused her and was kind ; the streets and shops were full of fascination to the country girl ; and the exceeding beauty of the town was in itself a happiness to her. But somehow, this time, the Fergusons and their

surroundings wearied her inexpressibly. She felt sad and depressed at leaving home, where at least she was free, and not utterly dependent upon others ; she longed to escape from Margaret's restless activity and Mrs. Ferguson's perpetual small gossip ; their thoughts and ways were not, and never could be, hers ; and a feeling of dismay crept over her, as she thought what her life would be if her new relations did not prove more congenial to her.

She was not left long, however, to indulge in these or any other speculations ; Margaret soon came in to stir her up, and for the rest of her visit she was never left alone again. The next day was spent in shopping, paying calls, and in a revision of Elsie's wardrobe, at which Mrs. Ferguson assisted, though her opinion was treated with contempt by her daughter, who was only disposed to agree with her when she remarked that Elsie's dresses were much too 'sombre' for a girl of her age. Margaret was feverishly anxious that her dance should be a success, and that

Elsie should make a good appearance at it, so part of the afternoon was devoted to an impromptu dancing lesson; Mrs. Ferguson being set to play dance music, in which both she and Margaret excelled. This Elsie quite enjoyed, as she did the dance itself, although she dreaded it beforehand, and had gone through a good deal of worry over her dressing. However, even Margaret found her white India muslin frock pretty and suitable, and rejected with scorn the scarlet geraniums with which Mrs. Ferguson proposed to 'lighten it up.' Everything went off admirably, as Margaret's entertainments usually did; and she felt amply repaid for the trouble she had taken, as she watched Elsie's lovely face, and the childish grace of her movements, and saw how much she was sought after.

'You are quite a success, my child!' she exclaimed enthusiastically, as she lit Elsie's bedroom candle. 'I *should* like to have you here longer! All the young men would be at your feet. You might be a little more

free and easy with them though—they like it better.’

‘Margaret,’ said Elsie solemnly, sitting down on the edge of her bed, ‘I am perfectly *sick* of young men. Do you know how many I have had introduced to me since I came here?’

Margaret stared at her.

‘Good gracious, child!’ she said, ‘how many then?’

‘No less than sixteen!’ replied Elsie, keeping her large eyes fixed upon Margaret with a tragic expression. ‘And they all made exactly the same remarks.’

‘Well, what would you have?’ said Margaret. ‘They don’t set up to be geniuses. And as to their number, let me tell you, Elsie, that it is not everybody here, in Edinburgh, who could have *collected* sixteen agreeable, well-bred young men in two days.’

Elsie blushed at this reproof, the severity of which was unlike Margaret’s usual gay good-nature.

‘Oh no, Margaret dear!’ said she, fearing she had been rude, ‘I know that—and I think it very clever of you to collect them, and very kind—but—I can’t talk to them as you do. I do not think I feel to care about young men much.’

‘You’re a perfect baby, that’s what you are,’ said Margaret good-humouredly. ‘It’s time you were in bed, so I’ll go.’

‘Good-night, Margaret,’ said Elsie, kissing her affectionately. ‘I liked the dance very, very much.’

As the Fergusons will not appear again in these pages, which are merely a chronicle of Elsie Ross’s experiences, it may be well to mention here that Margaret was married a year or two later to Dr. Ainslie, a physician of considerable celebrity, who inhabited a handsome house at the west end of the town. Here Margaret was able to go more into society, and to give entertainments during the Edinburgh season of a most brilliant and fashionable kind. As Mrs. Ferguson continued to live with her daughter, she was no

less benefited by the change in her circumstances.

Elsie and Hans quitted Edinburgh the following morning, and in due time arrived at King's Cross. As she stepped upon the platform and looked around her bewildered, a footman in blue and yellow livery came up, and touched his hat rather doubtfully.

'Are you from General Lindsay?' she asked, a little surprised. 'How kind of them,' she added mentally, 'to send a footman to meet me! and such an enormous one too!' and she surveyed William's six feet of stature with some admiration.

'Yes, miss,' said the footman. 'I will attend to your luggage, miss, and your—ahem—dawg. Parkins is here, miss, if you please.'

'These are both my boxes. Please show me which is Parkins. I will keep the dog.'

Mindful of Marjorie's story, Elsie had expected to find in Parkins a smart, youthful-looking lady's-maid, and could hardly believe her eyes when a little wizened elderly woman,

soberly dressed, and carrying a large reticule, accosted her. She felt the sharp little black eyes scrutinising her critically, but Parkins addressed her in honeyed tones: 'Miss Ross! This will be a happy day for my dear master and mistress. You must be very much fatigued, miss?'

'Thank you for coming to meet me, Parkins,' said Elsie with a smile. 'I did not expect it. Are we to sleep in London?'

'I have engaged rooms, miss, at a nice quiet 'otel. Mistress thought, if you were not too tired, we might travel 'ome to-morrow afternoon.'

Elsie made no objection, but got into the cab, while Parkins produced a telegraph form from her reticule, and wrote as follows:—
'From Priscilla Parkins, King's Cross Station, to Mrs. Lindsay, The Elms, Chippingham. Our dear young lady just arrived. Met at station by self and William. We trust not over-fatigued. Train punctual.'

'Pray read it, miss,' said Parkins, presenting the document to Elsie with some pride.

‘I think that will relieve dear mistress’s mind.’

Elsie warmly congratulated Parkins upon her skill in writing telegrams, and particularly upon the fact that there were exactly twenty words in this message. The thoughtful Parkins had, indeed, been engaged in its composition for a considerable time before Elsie’s arrival, but she only answered modestly, ‘I ’ave ’ad the blessing of a good education, miss, and I ’ope I ’ave profited by it in some measure.’

William was now entrusted with the missive, and charged to send it off at once, after which the party proceeded to a small hotel near Paddington Station, where they passed the night.

The following forenoon was rather tedious to Elsie; it was spent in going to various shops in a four-wheeled cab, accompanied by the faithful Parkins, who refused to let her charge out of her sight for an instant, and who did not consider ‘an ’ansom’ a respectable conveyance for a young lady.

The views of London to be obtained out of a cab window are necessarily limited, and Elsie's first impressions of the metropolis were far from enthusiastic. In the afternoon she and her attendants started on their homeward journey, which was not a very long one.

As they neared Chippingham Elsie looked about her anxiously. She saw low flat meadows, now beginning to be yellow with buttercups; wide ditches bordered with rows of pollarded willows; glimpses now and again of a slow and stately river, full to the brim, soaking through beds of rushes; here and there a snug little village, with neat cottages and gardens, and orchard trees covered with white and pink blossom. Then rows of mean-looking brick houses, some only half-built, a public-house, and a few shops; they were approaching a larger town.

'Here we are, miss,' said Parkins, collecting her parcels as the train entered the station.

A brougham with a pair of sleek bay

horses was awaiting them. They left the town and drove leisurely along a suburban road, with high brick walls on each side, which shut in the villa gardens, until they came to a large iron gate painted white, and thrown hospitably open. Elsie's heart beat fast as the wheels crunched upon the gravel drive, and the carriage drew up at the door of a good-sized red brick house of rather uninteresting appearance. Elsie had neither time nor inclination at that moment, however, to criticise its exterior. She was greeted on the threshold by a deafening chorus of barking, as two pug dogs precipitated themselves upon Hans to his great terror, while his mistress found herself tightly clasped in the embrace of her Aunt Caroline.

A little woman, possessed of considerable muscular strength of arm,—such was Elsie's first impression; she had to stoop low to kiss her.

‘My darling child!’ said Mrs. Lindsay in an agitated voice, at length releasing her. She passed on to speak a word to Parkins,

and Elsie had time to observe her. A plump, yet active little figure, in a prune-coloured silk dress, an Indian shawl round her shoulders, and on her head a mob-cap with velvet bows.

‘Shall I like her or dislike her?’ thought Elsie, trying furtively to catch a view of her aunt’s face. But she could not make up her mind. It was a bright, rather pleasant face, and there was an air of decision and energy about her which, upon the whole, attracted Elsie. There was not a silver thread in the black hair, but the cap with its lace frills which Mrs. Lindsay wore gave a softness to the face which perhaps it had lacked in youth; the black eyes were piercing and a trifle hard.

The first greetings over, Elsie was led into the drawing-room, a large airy room on the ground-floor. The furniture was modern, but there was no ‘high art’ or æsthetic colouring about it, everything was bright even to gaudiness. The walls were white and gold, so were the doors; the chairs and

sofas were covered, some with a bright chintz, others with bead and worsted work in various patterns. Beside Mrs. Lindsay's easy-chair stood a work-table littered over with scraps of calico of many colours. The French windows opened upon the garden ; outside there was a verandah, where a great wisteria grew, twisting and climbing round the pillars. When this was in flower it formed a perfect bower of bloom, but now the brown shoots were just coming out, and it was merely conspicuous by its rough knotted stem.

A thin, middle-aged lady rose from a wicker arm-chair as they entered, and came to meet them with a sort of nervous haste. The crotchet shawl she had been working dropped from her hands, and instantly became a prey to the larger of the two pugs, whose indiscreet behaviour showed that he had scarcely yet emerged from puppyhood. The lady was introduced as 'my dear cousin and friend, Miss Maynard.' She advanced hurriedly towards Elsie and made

one or two movements in the direction of her face, as if uncertain whether to kiss her or not. Elsie bent to receive the salute, but finding that Miss Maynard only made one or two ineffectual little dabs in the air, she at length decided to give up the attempt.

‘But where is my dearest Henry?’ cried Mrs. Lindsay.

‘He was here but a moment ago,’ answered Miss Maynard, eagerly looking round her on the floor, as if she hoped to pick up General Lindsay off the carpet. But his wife darted into the passage, and presently returned clinging to the arm of an old gentleman, who, it turned out, had been vainly searching for his niece amongst the luggage.

‘*Here* is our dear niece, my Henry!’ said Mrs. Lindsay, with deep feeling in her tone.

‘Eh, what?’ said the General, folding Elsie in another embrace. ‘I am glad to see you; I forget your name, my dear—Helen, eh?’

‘No, Uncle Henry, Elsie—Elsie Ross.

Helen was my mother's name,' she added softly.

Elsie had not expected to find her great-uncle so old and feeble-looking a man. He must have been at least twenty years older than his wife, who looked upwards of fifty. His features were finely chiselled, and his complexion had the ivory whiteness of one which had been fair in youth. A black velvet skull-cap covered his bald head, and a long silvery white beard added to his venerable appearance.

He took up a position on the hearthrug and surveyed his niece with evident complacency, rubbing his hands and chuckling to himself.

'And how did you leave them all at Rossie?' said he. 'Father got married, I hear. Grand wedding, eh?'

Mrs. Lindsay shook her head and frowned at her husband, but Elsie made answer calmly, 'The wedding took place to-day, I believe, Uncle Henry; it was to be very quiet.'

‘Quiet, was it?’ said the General. ‘I thought you would have been a bridesmaid.’

‘Henry!’ said Mrs. Lindsay.

‘They *should* have made you a bridesmaid, my dear,’ pursued the General, rubbing his hands again. ‘Stepmother good-looking, eh?’

‘*Hennery!*’ said Mrs. Lindsay—and a dead silence fell upon the company.

At this juncture the General providentially caught sight of Hans, which diverted his attention. ‘Eh!’ said he, ‘what’s that? a seal, eh?’

Everybody laughed at this, and Mrs. Lindsay shook her husband playfully by the shoulder.

‘You foolish, dear man! Put on your spectacles,’ said she.

Elsie hastened to apologise for bringing Hans into a household which appeared to be already so well provided with dogs, but General Lindsay was fond of animals, and Hans was soon at home upon his knee.

‘And now, my love,’ said Aunt Caroline

briskly, 'you would like to see your own little nest, *I* daresay. Come, you and I will go upstairs together.'

Mrs. Lindsay ushered Elsie upstairs accordingly, stopping several times during the ascent to pant, not because she was in the least out of breath, but in order to impress upon her niece's mind the fact that an unusual honour was being done her, and that it was not every young visitor who was personally conducted to her apartment. It is to be feared that this mark of condescension was lost upon Elsie, but her evident pleasure in the room to which she was taken quite satisfied her aunt. It was very bright and fresh with its pink and white draperies. The walls were hung with illuminated texts, and the view from the window was the same as that from the drawing-room, but more extensive, for beyond the garden and the paddock the river could be seen, with the boats and barges passing up and down upon it.

'What a beautiful river!' exclaimed Elsie with delight.

Mrs. Lindsay nodded patronisingly. 'Your uncle and I are very fond of our dear river,' an answer which conveyed to her hearer's mind the impression that it was their own especial property ; but on learning afterwards that it was the Thames, Elsie dismissed this idea.

'As you have brought no attendant, my love,' said Mrs. Lindsay, 'I have selected a well-principled young housemaid specially to wait upon you. Her name is Lucy Higgins, and she is a member of Miss Maynard's bible-class.'

She rang the bell as she spoke, and a pretty neat-looking girl appeared, curtsying and smiling. Then with another affectionate embrace and benediction, Mrs. Lindsay left the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

‘The blackbird amid leafy trees,
The lark above the hill,
Let loose their carols when they please,
Are quiet when they will. . . .

‘But we are press’d by heavy laws ;
And often, glad no more,
We wear a face of joy, because
We have been glad of yore.’

‘THE ELMS, CHIPPINGHAM, *April* 30.

‘MY DEAR AUNT GRIZEL—I put off writing my long letter till to-day, so that I might have more to tell you. The journey to London did not seem long, and they sent two servants to meet me from here—Parkins and a footman. My uncle and aunt are so very kind, but I would rather not have had P. London was very dark, and smelt of cooking, but it may not be so in all parts of the town ; I had not time to see it really well. I came here yesterday, and I do think the

country in England is beautiful, so green and flowery. Think of the apple blossom being all out, and the lilacs very nearly! This house is not exactly in the country; it is a villa, with a large garden, however, and the river Thames is quite near, which I am very glad of. Now I must tell you about my uncle and aunt. Aunt Caroline is very affectionate; I have never been so much kissed before. I do not quite like it, as I have done nothing at all to deserve so much kindness, and she may not like me when she comes to know me. But I hope she will. Uncle Henry is also full of affection. He is old and rather deaf, and wears a skull-cap, but he is very handsome still; Aunt Caroline is little and not pretty. There is another lady here called Miss Maynard; I do not know what to say about her, except that she is not strong, and seems rather afraid of Aunt Caroline. If it were not ridiculous, I would almost think she was afraid of me—I am sure she is of Hans. You will see by this that she is very nervous.

‘I have such a pretty room, with a view over the river, and I am to have a maid all to myself. There is a great number of servants in this house; I tried to count them when they came in to prayers, but I had not time to finish. At dinner there are three men-servants to wait—a butler, a footman, and a page-boy.

‘They keep a few hens here, and two cows to supply the house. The cows are Alderney, and very pretty—I think very little of the poultry. Aunt Caroline has two dogs, pugs, whose names are Pompon and Bijou. The latter is the son of the former; he is twice as big as his mother, and has not much sense.

‘I hope you are well, dearest Aunt Grizel, and have caught no cold—the wedding will be over now. I never wrote such a long letter before in my life, and must now stop. I remain, your affectionate niece,

‘ELSPETH ROSS.’

Elsie’s next letter was to her father; it ran as follows :—

‘MY DEAR PAPA—I arrived here safely yesterday afternoon. Uncle Henry and Aunt Caroline are both very kind, and seem pleased to see me. There is another lady who lives here, Miss Maynard, Aunt Caroline’s cousin. I am to study with her, as she is very accomplished. The country here is mostly in grass, which is well on, and all the cows are out. They keep two Alderneys here, so I do not suppose they get much for the calves. Considering the fine pasture hereabouts, I wonder the cattle are not better looking. How are all your beasts? I hope Euphemia is also well, and that she received the little parcel safely which I sent her from London. Please excuse mistakes.—I am, your affectionate daughter, ELSIE.’

The whole morning after Elsie’s arrival was spent by her in composing and writing the above epistles. Except for a brief note to her father when she had been absent on a few days’ visit, either at Drumsheugh or in Edinburgh, she had never had any practice

in English composition, her letters to her governess being in German. It may therefore be deemed high time that she should pursue her studies under the superintendence of the accomplished Miss Maynard. A course of instruction was accordingly set on foot, which occupied two hours of each morning, whilst Mrs. Lindsay read the newspapers to her husband in his study, as it was called.

Elsie found herself rather disappointed as to the extent of Miss Maynard's attainments; for she was really anxious to learn, and loved knowledge for its own sake. Miss Maynard possessed, as Aunt Caroline was wont to say, 'a truly elegant mind.' She knew a little French and Italian, a very little music, and was fond of poetry in a feeble way. She had also a faint glimmering of history, but was very hazy as to facts. Of science she was profoundly ignorant, partly on principle, as she thought it tended to scepticism. She was, moreover, so easily shocked, and so fearful of anything which looked like immo-

rality, that the readings in poetry were apt to come to an abrupt termination.

Hans was, of course, always present during those hours of study, and he and his mistress were both so gentle that Miss Maynard soon got over her nervous agitation, and grew warmly attached to them. As she became more at home, Elsie would put forth her own arguments and views, at first to the great surprise and alarm of her instructress.

‘Miss Maynard,’ she began one day, ‘I am shamefully ignorant.’

‘Indeed, my dear,’ replied Miss Maynard, ‘I do not think you so very backward; and if you continue to persevere and to pay attention, you will soon know as much as a young lady of your age and station requires. I so often deplore that fashion of the present day, young women striving to be on a par with those of the opposite sex.’

‘Oh, I don’t mean that,’ said Elsie, feeling rather impatient of this sentiment, which she was aware was borrowed from her Aunt Caroline. ‘For Miss Maynard,’ thought

she, 'would never dare to deplore anything by herself.'

'I don't mean that, but there is so very much in the world to learn about. Of course no one can hope to know it all, but one might at least try to learn something.'

Miss Maynard cleared her throat and looked doubtful.

'A little general information,' said she.

'Yes,' replied Elsie, 'but the information in this book'—glancing at the volume before her, which was entitled *The Keyhole of Knowledge, A Manual of Useful Instruction*—'is so very general. It deals with each subject as if it were afraid of it.'

'Science,' said Miss Maynard, 'is far from being a safe study. But if you really wish to pursue it, my dear, here is a book which has been recommended to me, called *Peeps at Physical Science*, which, I am told, will afford cultivation of the intellect without endangering our faith.'

'Is our faith so easily endangered then?' asked Elsie. 'Dear Miss Maynard, I can-

not think it is really so shaky; if it were, it is scarcely worth having.' She took the book from Miss Maynard's hand, and glanced through it. 'I do not think,' she said, 'that it would cultivate my intellect only to "peep" at a thing. My mind is like a garden with nothing in it—very well, this book is like a hen scratching on the top, while what it wants is to be dug with a spade. Now, supposing we took up one branch of science—I'll tell you what, Miss Maynard; I'll take up any one you like.'

Miss Maynard did not receive this handsome offer with enthusiasm. She sighed and hesitated a good deal, and at last ventured to hint that 'a little botany was a pleasing study.'

Accordingly the study of botany was begun, with some degree of zeal, and after a little while it became quite a new interest to Miss Maynard, although Elsie was still unsatisfied.

These studies were regarded by Aunt Caroline with toleration, if not with sym-

pathy. She herself found little pleasure in books of any sort, and even disliked any one to read in her presence. She occupied herself, as she expressed it, with the 'study of character.' The good lady began with an excellent opinion of her own worth and talents, and did not expect any one else to be equally gifted. At first her very strong and emphatic expression of opinion upon every subject, whether she knew anything about it or not, filled Elsie with unfeigned surprise; but when she became better acquainted with her aunt, she found that it was one of that lady's articles of faith that whatsoever she herself thought, said, or did, must be, not only right, but perfect. She was very conscientious, and held strong and well-defined religious opinions; her own particular creed being, of course, infallible. There was no haziness in Mrs. Lindsay's mind, no softening shade. In her study of character, the righteous and the wicked stood out before her as two distinct classes, and she had no difficulty in pronouncing who among her

acquaintance belonged to each. Elsie early discovered that her father was a prominent member of the latter class; Aunt Caroline disapproved of his very existence (on religious grounds), any casual mention of him by his daughter being received with a shake of the head, an upturning of the eyes, and the subject would be dismissed as one too dark and painful to be dwelt upon. But Elsie herself was an object of her aunt's enthusiastic affection, and she was treated in every respect as a daughter of the house. It had been a deep disappointment to Mrs. Lindsay to have no children of her own—she who was so admirably fitted to bring them up! Had it not been for her well-known piety, and great importance to mankind, she would almost have regarded it as an oversight on the part of Providence, to remedy which she had often wished to adopt a child, but the unexpected obstinacy of the General upon this point prevented the project being carried into execution. He would have no one, he said, except a relation of his own, asserting with

some shrewdness, that his wife would soon tire of her orphan ; who, without any claim upon him, would still have to be supported. On the death of his nephew, Colonel Lindsay, however, the General proposed to adopt his eldest son David, then a boy at school, but his mother, Lady Eleanor, absolutely refused to give him up, and when she married again a few years later, she still adhered to that resolution, although she encouraged the boy to make frequent visits to his grand-uncle by whom he was greatly beloved.

Elsie was very happy during the first few weeks of her stay at Chippingham. She enjoyed the fresh beauty of the spring weather, which was almost a revelation to her ; for having spent her life on the east coast of Scotland, she had hitherto entertained quite an opposite opinion from the poets who speak of the ‘merry month of May.’ The rigorous punctuality and order of the household, and all Aunt Caroline’s curious little ways, at first caused her nothing but amusement. The only person who dared to contradict Mrs.

Lindsay was Howell, the butler, or How'll, as he was called by the General, who had never lost his strong Scotch accent. Howell was a most respectable personage, who could do everything, at least such was the popular idea. His subordinates were William, who has already been mentioned, and an unfortunate youth named Herbert, the page-boy, who had been raised to that post on account of his proficiency as a Sunday scholar. Herbert's talents, however, were not conspicuous in any other direction; he was constantly getting into scrapes, and was usually to be seen in tears, in consequence of some rebuke from one of his numerous superiors. He had, amongst other vices, a curious knack of losing the buttons from off his suit. Elsie noticed with some interest that he never appeared with his full complement of buttons, and wondered why he always lost them off the parts which showed most. One day at dinner, Elsie, from her seat next her uncle, observed a shining object in the spoonful of soup he was about to convey to his mouth.

With a sudden impulse she seized his arm, the words she intended to utter resolving themselves into an unearthly shriek. 'A—ow! don't eat that!' she said.

General Lindsay dropped his spoon, imagining that his niece had suddenly gone mad. Elsie was laughing too much to explain; but the discreet Howell, with a severe countenance, removed the plate, fished out the substance, wiped it, and presented it to his master on a salver.

'Eh?' said the General—'what's this, eh?'

'One of 'Erbert's buttons, sir,' replied Howell sternly.

The guilty Herbert burst into tears, and stood sobbing loudly, while an awe-stricken silence fell upon the company.

'Take him away!' said Mrs. Lindsay, waving her hand, as if he were a dish, and the offender was accordingly removed by William.

'You have *saved* your uncle, dear,' she continued, turning to Elsie, 'but—might it not have been done in a more ladylike

manner? Never forget *who* you are, *what* you say, nor *how* you say it.'

No one had much appetite for the rest of that meal, and for the most part there was silence, only broken by Mrs. Lindsay saying very severely to Miss Maynard, who was overcome with emotion, 'Cecilia! unless those are tears of joy they are uncalled for.'

The good-natured General began to utter some deprecating grunts, but these were quelled by his wife, who shook her forefinger at him gravely; while Elsie wondered why any one should shed tears of joy because the General had nearly swallowed a button in his soup.

After dinner, Mrs. Lindsay, still preserving the tragic sternness of her mood, retired to the study with her husband, whence they did not emerge till it was time for prayers. Mrs. Lindsay always conducted family worship herself, and that evening it was made particularly impressive, and abounded in awful warnings to the idle and careless.

The results of this episode were, that

Herbert's voice was thick with sobs for some days afterwards ; and that 'an attack,' from which the General suffered in the course of the next fortnight, was attributed, by his wife, to the shock his nervous system had sustained on this occasion.

These attacks, which occurred from time to time, were sufficiently alarming, to judge from the perturbation into which the whole household was thrown. What was their exact nature remained a mystery, except, it may be presumed, to the patient himself, his wife, the doctor, and (it was believed) Parkins, who was remarkable for her medical skill.

According to Mrs. Lindsay, her husband's attacks proceeded from peculiar, and often, as it would seem, remote causes. The ungodliness of an acquaintance ; the misconduct of a domestic ; any vexation or disappointment which befell Mrs. Lindsay herself ; or the slightest worry or anxiety, were sufficient, as she averred, to produce upon the General's sensitive frame the most disastrous consequences.

The first time after Elsie's arrival that one of these attacks occurred, she was greatly alarmed by the solemn bustle which prevailed; the long faces of her aunt and Parkins, Miss Maynard's agitation, the arrival of the doctor, and the whispered consultations behind doors.

'Is he *very* ill, Miss Maynard? Is he worse than usual?' she asked anxiously.

'I don't know,' said Miss Maynard sobbing, 'I am so nervous, your aunt *never* tells me.'

'Well, don't cry,' said Elsie kindly, 'I will try and find out. Very likely he'll be better to-morrow.'

She sallied forth accordingly in quest of information, and went cautiously into the passage which led to her uncle's room. As she did so, a door opened, and Parkins issued forth, carrying a plate with a mustard plaster on it. Elsie hastened up to her, 'How is the Gen——'

'Don't get in my way, please, miss'—and Parkins vanished through the green baize door.

‘He must be very ill,’ thought Elsie, too anxious about her uncle to be as angry at Parkins’ rudeness as she would otherwise have been. She walked away absently, and next found herself in the dining-room, where Howell was laying the cloth.

‘Do you know, miss, whether Mrs. Lindsay will dine this evening?’ he inquired.

‘I do not know, Howell; I am afraid General Lindsay is worse. Is this a *very* bad attack, do you know?’

Howell looked with half contemptuous pity at Elsie’s white face and dilated eyes.

‘There is no call to be alarmed, miss,’ said he in a cheerful tone, arranging the glasses rapidly on the table. ‘The General often ’as them, miss. He’s something of an ’ippocondruck, *he* is.’

‘Thank you, Howell,’ said Elsie, and she went away, somewhat reassured, to console Miss Maynard as best she might.

General Lindsay appeared again in public the next day, looking a little whiter and more fragile, but otherwise much as usual, and

Elsie was never quite so frightened again, though she now became consumed with curiosity as to the nature of her uncle's ailment. She applied first to Miss Maynard, although from her she did not expect to receive much information.

'What is the matter with him, Miss Maynard?' she asked. 'Is it his heart, or his liver, or what?'

'I never inquired, dear,' returned Miss Maynard, shrinking. 'I am so nervous in cases of illness, and your dear aunt is so——'

'Easily made angry,' suggested Elsie.

'No—no, dear, reticent,' said Miss Maynard, 'reticent is the word.'

'You think her reticent,' said Elsie slowly. 'Now I should have thought her not reticent enough. However I'll ask her.'

Miss Maynard endeavoured to dissuade her pupil from this rash course, so Elsie decided to question Parkins first.

'By the bye, Parkins,' said she one day, affecting a lofty and careless air—'what is the nature of the General's attacks?'

‘They are of a very severe nature, miss,’ replied Parkins, primming up her mouth.

‘Does he suffer much?’ asked Elsie.

‘Yes, miss, he suffers very much, and I do not like young ladies as inquires into things outside of their province,’ was the snappish retort.

‘It is not of the least consequence,’ said Elsie, walking away with her head in the air, ‘whether you like them or don’t like them.’

It was not without great caution that Elsie addressed her aunt upon the subject; but she was not prepared for the outburst of feeling which her innocent-sounding question occasioned.

‘My dear,’ said Aunt Caroline, ‘how can *you* ask? Your uncle has the *Lindsay* constitution.’

Elsie stood before her in silent consternation, whilst her aunt drew out a little pocket-handkerchief, and applied it rapidly to each eye in succession, at the same time shaking her other hand to and fro in the air.

‘Don’t take any notice,’ she gasped; ‘I shall be better soon.’

Presently she put the handkerchief into her pocket again, and looked sternly at Elsie with her little black eyes. ‘You have distressed me, dear—distressed me excessively,’ she said.

Elsie apologised for her indiscretion, and was forgiven; but, after this conversation, she ceased to prosecute any further inquiries respecting her uncle’s mysteriously constituted system.

The Sundays at the Elms were the days on which Elsie really felt homesick; a sort of solemn excitement then prevailed, which she particularly disliked, and Aunt Caroline assumed a peculiarly exalted and chastened demeanour. The church they attended was at some distance; for although there was one close at hand, the views of the incumbent were not in accordance with those of Mrs. Lindsay, who, therefore, drove in state, in a closed carriage, to the village of Gravehurst, which was rather more than a mile distant,

accompanied by as many of her household as could contrive to find room in the carriage.

The vicar of Gravehurst was the Reverend Ernest Maynard, a nephew of Miss Cecilia Maynard, and a connection of Mrs. Lindsay. He had not been long in this parish, and had formerly had a curacy in the east end of London. He had devoted himself to the work there with great earnestness and zeal, and it was with reluctance that he relinquished it for the country living which had been offered to him ; but his health having given way, he yielded at last to the persuasions of his friends, and had now been settled at Gravehurst for nearly two years. He was a great favourite with Mrs. Lindsay, who considered him a most earnest and self-devoted young man ; but she found that even his views required a little alteration, which she never lost an opportunity of recommending to him. She was apt to complain that he was very stubborn in argument, as he was too conscientious to disguise his convictions in the smallest degree for the

sake of making himself agreeable to any lady, however influential. Mrs. Lindsay had studied character to some purpose, however, and she could recognise and respect genuine merit, when it was not opposed to her strongest prejudices.

She was a thorough matchmaker, and, almost from the moment that Elsie came under her roof, she had decided that she had at last found the wife for Ernest Maynard. The pretty vicarage, with its snug rooms, its sunny garden, and its flowering shrubs and creepers, would be a fitting home for her fair young niece. United to Ernest, her character would develop into all that could be desired; while, under Aunt Caroline's direct supervision, they would jointly become, as time went on, an ornament to the Church, a pattern to the neighbourhood, and a blessing to the nation at large. Animated by these hopes, Mrs. Lindsay lost no opportunity of bringing the young people together. Besides Mr. Maynard's occasional week-day visits, at which she always contrived

that Elsie should be present, she used, after service on Sunday mornings, to linger at the vicarage until it was time to return home to dinner. Early dinner was one of the Sunday observances at the Elms, and helped to render the General's life a burden to him on that day.

On fine days this half-hour at Gravehurst was usually spent in the garden, when Mrs. Lindsay would so arrange it that the vicar and Elsie should walk on in front, while she, hanging on the General's arm, viewed from a distance the objects of her benevolent designs.

Even as regarded mere outward appearance (thought she), how perfectly they suited one another ! Ernest Maynard, with his dark, thoughtful-looking countenance and severely clerical deportment ; and Elsie, fair and graceful, with her soft eyes and sweet serious face, listening with such attentive gravity to the instructive observations of her pastor !

Mrs. Lindsay fully enjoyed the dramatic effect of the situation. Though in principle

strongly opposed to the theatre, she was, unconsciously, an actress by nature, many of her words and gestures being, as it were, thrown in for effect. Yet she was very quick to see and to despise affectation in others, and perhaps it was Elsie's very straightforwardness and simplicity which so won upon her.

During these promenades in the vicarage garden, Miss Maynard was usually sentenced to remain in the house, on account of her well-known imprudence, and liability to catch cold. This poor lady was really delicate, and subject to attacks of bronchitis, especially during the trying spring months. The weather being unusually fine this year, she suffered less, but about the middle of June she caught cold, no one knew how, and was laid up for nearly a fortnight. Elsie was for some time forbidden to enter the patient's room; but having one day ascertained from Parkins that she was sitting up, she went to pay her kind friend a visit.

Miss Maynard was seated in an arm-chair,

wrapped up in shawls and blankets, and looking very disconsolate; she seemed much cheered by seeing Elsie, and after this the girl went to visit her daily, bringing her flowers and strawberries, and entertaining her with descriptions of all that went on downstairs. When this state of things had lasted for about a week, Miss Maynard seemed so well that Elsie suggested her return to the drawing-room.

‘I am sure the change would do you good,’ she said.

‘I think it would, dear, but as long as my cough lasts, I fear I must remain a prisoner. It tries your dear aunt so to hear any one coughing.’

‘Tries her!’ said Elsie indignantly; ‘what nonsense! If I were you I should just come straight downstairs and cough as much as ever I liked.’

‘Oh no, dear!’ said Miss Maynard, appalled by the audacity of this proposal. ‘I saw how much it disturbed her when she came into my room this morning. And then

my unfortunate nervousness ! I always cough more when she is present. She has been so tried, too, to-day, by the conduct of that headstrong young kitchenmaid.'

'Has she? What did the kitchenmaid do?' inquired Elsie with interest.

'She was overheard by Parkins conversing with the gardener's boy,' replied Miss Maynard in a lowered tone. 'But hush, my love! your aunt would not wish it spoken about. She has really felt it sadly. Let us talk of other things—you are too young to know life's cares and trials.'

Elsie sat down and gave her mind to the subject. After awhile she said, 'We have so many trials, here in England, and we *feel* them so much. At home I never dreamt of feeling everything in that way—I do not think my father would have liked it. Of course if I broke my leg—or lost a near relation—or put all my money into a bank which failed—I would say I had a trial, but here everything is so different. Why, if Herbert has put too many coals on the fire,

that is a trial, or if anybody spills their tea——’

Miss Maynard sighed. ‘You have the buoyancy and the light-heartedness of youth, dear child.’

‘Have I?’ said Elsie—‘I do not know. I have not felt light-hearted, but then I had always so much to think of at home.’

Elsie went slowly away to her own room, and sat down by the open window. ‘Yes! I had a great deal to think of at home, but there was some sense in it there,’ she said to herself. ‘Here I seem so useless and unnecessary—but so I should be if I went back; in fact, more so. What should I be doing now if I were at home? This time last year——’ and Elsie’s thoughts wandered back to Rossie; to the sea, the fir-woods, and the moor. Ah! how sweet it was in the early summer time, when the cold winds of spring were past, and she lived out of doors the whole long day. How pleasant the fir-trees smelt in the dry sunshine, and how bright were the little summer flowers; milk-

wort and white bedstraw and tormentil, and bell-heather, pale pink and rich purple. And down by the burn the meadow-sweet and the bracken would be growing tall and thick. And in the evenings she would linger out until her father came and scolded her; it seemed such a waste of time to go to bed, while a streak of light stayed all night in the northern sky.

‘I wish I had known then,’ she thought, ‘that I should be here now; I should have enjoyed it even more—I would not have wasted a moment. And if anything good ever comes to me, I will remember, and enjoy it; it would be such a pity if it were lost. And in the meantime, I am happy—really quite happy; I might easily be worse off than I am now.’

CHAPTER IX.

‘ I will have hopes which cannot fade
For flowers the valley yields,
I will have humble thoughts, instead
Of silent, dewy fields ;
My spirit, and my God, shall be
My seaward hill, my boundless sea.’

By Elsie's arrangement Miss Maynard did come downstairs that very afternoon, and her recovery was soon complete.

Elsie had far more influence with her Aunt Caroline than she herself knew. She had never been accustomed to be contradicted or thwarted in small things, and this gave her manner a fearlessness and freedom before which Aunt Caroline gave way. Within certain limits, she came and went as she would, and she enjoyed an immunity from censure and supervision which surprised those who knew Mrs. Lindsay better. To the

petty restrictions which were imposed upon her, Elsie submitted with gentle patience, however unreasonable they appeared to her. It was only common gratitude, she thought, to yield in small matters to one who treated her with so much affection. She had submitted to her father in his angry moods, less from timidity, or even filial reverence, than from her naturally gentle, peace-loving disposition, joined to a compassionate toleration for his infirmities of temper. Curiously enough, she associated Aunt Caroline with him in her mind, and considered that elderly people were often a little unreasonable, and must be humoured and made allowances for. For her Aunt Grizel she had a more genuine respect; she placed a good deal of reliance on her judgment and good sense, qualities which she did not credit her Aunt Caroline with possessing. Even to Aunt Grizel, however, she had never given her full confidence; she thought her too old to be startled by any new or unfamiliar ideas.

As time went on the life at the Elms grew

very wearisome to Elsie, and she needed all her patience and self-control. Her occupations were all so different from what she had been used to ; she took little interest in them, and found them petty and trivial. After her two hours of study, she was expected to remain in the drawing-room with some sort of needlework till luncheon time. Elsie rather disliked needlework of any sort, and entirely detested the kind which she had to do, which consisted chiefly of patchwork quilts for hospitals. It was not till the afternoon that she was able to breathe the fresh air which at Rossie she had almost lived in, never allowing any sort of weather to keep her in the house. After luncheon, the elder members of the party went for a drive ; Elsie usually declined to accompany them, and was left free till their return, but there were scarcely any walks she could indulge in. Mrs. Lindsay did not like her to go to the river ; she might not walk on the road for fear of tramps, nor on the streets, which were ‘not respectable ;’ there was nothing

left but the gravel drive, the garden, and the paddock, and with these Elsie was fain to content herself.

On Tuesday afternoons she went with Miss Maynard to a missionary working party, where they met most of their female acquaintances in the neighbourhood. These were not much to Elsie's taste, nor, indeed, to that of Aunt Caroline. The families at Chippingham were, as a rule, rather below Mrs. Lindsay in social standing ; and though she enjoyed reigning like a queen in the midst of her little circle, she admitted no one to very great terms of intimacy. Occasionally, Elsie was taken to a garden party, or a picnic, but it was not an event of frequent occurrence. She had never had any girl friends, and at first she was interested, and curious to meet girls of her own age ; but she found that she had almost no tastes in common with her new acquaintances, who, on their parts, thought her reserved and proud. On her return from these social gatherings, she would seek the society of Hans, her first and only friend ;

and, retiring with him to a corner of the sofa, would caress and talk to him, and tell him how beautiful he was, and how brave, and how elegant, with any other adjectives which occurred to her as appropriate.

Elsie was very sensitive to kindness, and, unused as she had been to meet with any demonstrations of affection, she was touched by those which her new friends lavished upon her, even though they began at times to be a little oppressive. The way in which all her time was arranged for her, and an account required of whatever she had been doing, became very irksome; yet sometimes she found an extra half-hour in which she could slip down to the river, which had a peculiar charm for her. She had discovered a little nook amongst the willows, unseen from the house, where she could sit and watch the water, but the existence of this retreat she kept a secret. She had also one other resort. Nearly opposite the entrance gate, and a little way up the slope, a side road led to a large, new, red brick church.

The ground about it had evidently been newly laid out, and was planted with minute shrubs of Portugal laurel, rhododendron, and holly. Elsie went up this road at first partly out of curiosity, partly because it seemed quiet, and finding that one of the church doors was always kept open, she went in. The quiet and the soft subdued light attracted her, and after the first time she often went again. She would gladly have attended the daily five o'clock service, but as her aunt disapproved of the church, on account of the incumbent's views being, as she said, Ritualistic, Elsie did not like to distress her by doing so frequently. She went, however, whenever she could do so without attracting much attention, not from a preference for any forms in particular, but because the service and the beautiful music soothed her, and lifted her above all the petty worries and annoyances at home.

This week-day church-going was a part of Elsie's conduct which was totally incomprehensible to her aunt, although Mrs. Lindsay

did not like absolutely to forbid it. If Elsie liked going to All Saints Church on ordinary days, and even sometimes when there was no service going on, how much more, one would think, ought she to be delighted and edified by the ministrations of Mr. Maynard, both in church and at home! Yet these privileges never seemed to afford this strange girl the smallest gratification.

Ernest too, on his part, did not betray by his manner that peculiarly ardent affection for this young member of his flock, which Mrs. Lindsay was certain he must inwardly feel. The apparent insensibility of both was, to say the least of it, very disheartening; but Mrs. Lindsay kept all misgivings to herself; confiding to the General her hopes, but not her fears.

‘Poor dear young man!’ she said, hastening to her husband’s room one day, after Mr. Maynard had left the house,—‘there can be no doubt where *his* affections are placed!’

‘Eh?’ said the General—‘where’s that?’

‘Dearest Henry! you know whom I

mean. I only hope our darling will appreciate his full worth.'

'Oh—ah! yes. Maynard, to be sure. You were going to marry him to one of the Dales, weren't you?'

'I allude, of course, to your own niece,' said Mrs. Lindsay sharply.

The General fidgeted and looked uncomfortable.

'Little Elsie?' he said deprecatingly. 'Pretty girl, Elsie. Too pretty for a parson, eh?'

The General's marked preference for pretty girls, and indifference at least, if not aversion, to the clergy, were a source of great distress to his wife. She was sorry she had mentioned the matter to him at all, the more so, as he lost no time in remonstrating with his niece on the subject.

'Well, Miss Elsie!' he began, 'what's this I hear? Caught the parson, eh?'

'I?' said Elsie, colouring indignantly. 'What do you mean, Uncle Henry?'

The General was about to explain himself

at length, but Mrs. Lindsay looked up sternly from her writing, and sharply tapped the table with a pencil. 'Henry!' said she—'silence! Silence, Henry!' and the General was quenched.

This little conversation had more effect in furthering Mrs. Lindsay's wishes than all her previous efforts. The next time Mr. Maynard called, Elsie absented herself, and during the following Sunday's walk her manner was cold and distant. This naturally caused Mr. Maynard to wonder what was the matter with her, and after a course of self-examination, he discovered that it was her presence which made the Elms so attractive to him, and that his Sunday walk in the garden would lose all its charm if she were not by his side.

This discovery startled and disturbed him not a little. He had had some thoughts, now that his health was re-established, of returning to his London work amongst the poor and outcast, and he was shocked to find himself becoming comparatively indifferent

to their miseries, and turning his thoughts towards a life of worldly ease and happiness.

After a week or two Elsie, having forgotten her uncle's speech or attaching little importance to it, returned to her former manner, with perhaps a touch of additional kindness, as she saw Mr. Maynard so evidently depressed and harassed; and Mrs. Lindsay observed this state of things with growing satisfaction. At length Ernest, tempted as it were on all sides, determined to try what absence and a visit to the scene of his former labours would do towards effacing this new image from his mind.

One hot day in the beginning of July he walked to the Elms to inform the ladies there of his intended absence, and to bid them good-bye for a time. He found Mrs. Lindsay alone, Miss Maynard and Elsie being in the garden engaged in their botanical studies.

Mrs. Lindsay heard of Ernest's intended departure with much surprise, not unmixed with indignation, and expressed her disapproval in her usual emphatic manner.

‘Going to London for a month! My dear Ernest, what — in — the — world can have prompted such a step?’

‘You know, my kind friend, that I have always intended returning there ultimately, and I have lately been led to fear lest a life of ease should lead to mere self-pleasing, and should weaken this purpose in my mind.’

‘Now, now, Ernest,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, nodding her head, ‘don’t you be self-opinionated. You know very well what I have always thought of this foolish, and self-conceited, and inconsiderate scheme of yours. I do not approve of it in any shape or in any way. It may be all very well for those whose systems are so constructed as to withstand the anxieties, and the fatigues, and the——’

‘Forgive me for interrupting you, but I have considered the matter well. I have already provided myself with a substitute for a month only, and you know I have settled nothing finally.’

‘You cannot deceive *me*, Ernest. There

is something which you are concealing from me.'

As she said this with extreme sternness, Mrs. Lindsay pointed her forefinger in the direction of Mr. Maynard's waistcoat, as if to indicate that she knew the exact spot where the object alluded to was secreted. Ernest felt his colour rising beneath her scrutiny—he stammered and hesitated. 'I will tell you all, Mrs. Lindsay, when I return—in the meantime——' He rose and looked about for his hat.

'If you wish to acquaint your Aunt Cecilia with your resolution,' said Mrs. Lindsay, coldly but impressively, 'you will find her—with my niece—in the garden. And tell your aunt, if you please, that I should wish to speak to her. Now go—and beware, Ernest, how you trifle with your own heart.'

Mr. Maynard, though a brave man, was only too thankful to escape. Mrs. Lindsay's last words had raised a tumult of feelings within him, and before joining the two ladies he paused a few moments to collect his

thoughts. At the bottom of the garden was a small pond with a seat in front of it. There he caught sight of Elsie's pale blue cotton gown, and, on approaching, found her and Miss Maynard intently examining some duck-weed through a magnifying glass.

'I have been commissioned by Mrs. Lindsay to find you, my dear aunt,' he began.

Miss Maynard jumped up in a nervous flutter at the message and her nephew's unexpected appearance.

'Does she wish to see me?'

'She wishes to speak to you presently, but I was about to tell you——' He was unable to finish his sentence, for Miss Maynard was already on her way to the house. She had been frequently warned by Mrs. Lindsay never to make a third in any possible serious conversation between Mr. Maynard and Elsie; and she forgot everything else in her anxiety to carry out these instructions to the letter.

Elsie laid aside her duck-weed rather re-

luctantly, and made some trivial remark which Mr. Maynard scarcely seemed to hear; he looked anxious and disturbed.

‘Miss Ross,’ said he abruptly, ‘I came to say good-bye to you and to my aunt, as I am leaving Gravehurst.’

‘Are you, Mr. Maynard?’ said Elsie, much surprised; ‘not for altogether?’

‘By no means. I hope to return in a month. Circumstances have made it desirable that I should leave home for a short time for change, and I intend revisiting my old parish in the east end of London.’

‘You have not been well? But I should not have thought London a good place to go to for change. Won’t you be very hot? Not that I do not think a change a good thing—an excellent thing,’ said Elsie emphatically, by no means wishing to hinder Mr. Maynard’s departure, which would be a certain relief to her, yet disinterestedly anxious for his welfare.

‘I am not ill,’ he replied, ‘and my personal feelings are of little consequence. I have with

difficulty prevailed upon my friend, Mr. Talmud Brooks, to exchange with me. He will doubtless be greatly invigorated by country air, while I——’ He paused.

‘That,’ said Elsie approvingly, ‘is a good action. I hope you will not suffer from it in any way, and I am sure it will do your friend good. It is very hot, even here,’ she added, rather languidly.

‘Miss Ross,’ said Ernest presently, ‘you told me the other day when I asked you that you found your life here somewhat empty and hollow. Have you still that feeling?’

‘I did not mean to complain of my life here,’ said Elsie hastily. ‘I am very—very—comfortable, you know, and every one is as kind to me as possible. It is very different from home, of course, but I should be most ungrateful if I complained.’

‘Then you no longer find your life hollow?’

Elsie had tilted her hat back and was gazing meditatively at the sky; she now set it straight, and looked at Mr. Maynard.

‘Indeed I do,’ she said with decision. ‘I find it getting hollower and hollower.’

Mr. Maynard appeared deeply pained.

‘There must be a fault somewhere,’ he said. ‘Have you ever attempted any parish work—such as district visiting?’

‘I have thought of that,’ said Elsie; ‘for so many of the ladies here do a great deal, and I would have gone to see some of the poor people, but then you see we are not in *your* parish, and Aunt Caroline does not approve of Mr. Broadway’s poor, or Mr. Mouteagle’s either, and my uncle thinks I might catch diseases and bring them home. You know it does not do to annoy my uncle and aunt; it makes them ill; so it really does not seem as if work amongst the poor were the duty appointed for me.’

Elsie’s face was so young and childish as she gravely looked up at him for advice, that Mr. Maynard felt that to speak his wishes then would be premature as well as weak; but he scarcely felt in a mood to give her pastoral counsel as to her duties.

‘I will send you a little book of mine,’ he said, ‘if you will accept it. It is entitled *Reassuring Remarks, spoken at Random*. I must leave you now.’

‘Won’t you come in?’ said Elsie. ‘Miss Maynard will be vexed not to see you again before you go.’

But Ernest, not daring to risk another encounter with Mrs. Lindsay, made a hasty excuse and departed.

Elsie watched him as with long hurried strides he reached the little garden door and, passing through it, disappeared.

‘He is a good man, I do think,’ she said to herself. ‘I would really like him quite well if Aunt Caroline did not worry me so about him. But, oh dear! he is dull—or is it I who am dull? He always answers me as if he did not understand, or thought me a fool; but then so do all the people hereabouts. I am of a different sort somehow;’ and Elsie sighed.

‘I am not going to begin and think about my trials, though; I am here, and I must

just stay here, and there is no use in making a fuss. If I were at home I should have a large trial in the shape of Euphemia, probably worse than any here. Come along, little Hans! I know you miss the rabbits too, but we must be resigned, and not wish for what we cannot get. Perhaps if we behave very well, we may have some parish work given us, and is not that more ennobling than hunting rabbits?’

So saying, Elsie went slowly towards the house, and presently caught sight of Mrs. Lindsay tapping the window and beckoning from within.

‘What are you about, child?’ said she irritably as Elsie entered, ‘remaining out so long in the heat and glare?’

‘Oh, I like the heat, Aunt Caroline,’ said Elsie cheerfully, ‘as long as I don’t have to work. Mr. Maynard is going to London—he told you so, did he not? He was sorry he had not time to come in again.’

‘Oh, I know where he is going,’ said Mrs. Lindsay—with a peculiar intonation, as who

should say: 'I knew all about that, and a good deal more, long before *you* came into the world;—'and *he* knows what I think of the scheme! Ah, self, self! how it blinds our eyes!'

'I thought it nice of Mr. Maynard to go,' said Elsie, much puzzled. 'Why do you think it selfish, Aunt Caroline? He merely wishes to cool his friend. Surely no one would go to the east end of London out of selfishness.'

'What did he say to you, child?' asked Mrs. Lindsay, rather mollified by this warm defence of Mr. Maynard, and looking curiously at her niece. Elsie seated herself, took her hat off, and considered.

'He said—that circumstances had made him wish to go to London for a month, and that his friend was coming to Gravehurst, as he needed change of air. And he asked me if I ever did parish work, and when I said I did not, he promised to send me a book called *Obscure Observations*, or some name like that, and—that was about all, I think,

except that he hoped you would excuse his coming in.'

Mrs. Lindsay was dissatisfied, but it was impossible to doubt that Elsie had faithfully reported the substance of the conversation.

'*Obscure Observations*, child!'—this with increased irritation—'when will you learn to arrange, and properly to express, your ideas? How can that be the title of a book?'

'No more it is, Aunt Caroline,' said Elsie, laughing a little; 'I forget the name, but really it was something very nearly as funny.'

The hot weather was succeeded by several days of constant thunderstorms, which produced, indoors as well as out, what Elsie mentally termed 'an atmosphere.' Mrs. Lindsay was irritable and 'tried;' Miss Maynard depressed and tearful; while the General, who was always in the greatest force when other people were ill or out of spirits, often unconsciously stirred up strife by his cheerful but inapposite remarks. The rain confined everybody to the house, and even

the dogs shared in the general discomfort, which Bijou, in particular, greatly added to, as want of exercise always disagreed with him.

Elsie was therefore agreeably surprised one morning at finding Aunt Caroline radiant, and full of mildness and benignity. A letter from the General's grand-nephew, David Lindsay, offering an immediate visit, had been the cause of this happy change. The moment breakfast was over Mrs. Lindsay bustled away to make preparations, which were to be on a scale of splendour proportioned to such an event as the arrival of their 'Indian hero,' for so Aunt Caroline termed him. Elsie begged for a history of his exploits, but being unable to ascertain from her uncle that the young warrior had ever seen actual service, or distinguished himself in any way, she was disposed to be somewhat contemptuous of all the commotion made in his honour. The excitement of the mistress was fully shared in by the domestics, to judge by the bustle which prevailed on the stairs,—

housemaids running hither and thither, and Parkins reigning as viceroy in the guest-chamber, arranging and dictating.

After luncheon Mrs. Lindsay issued her final orders for the ensuing day, when the guest was expected to arrive.

‘This, my love,’ said she to Elsie, ‘is the key of the china closet. Will you assist Parkins in bringing out the best dinner-service for to-morrow’s use, as Howell, with William and Herbert, are already fully occupied in polishing the plate? I need not tell you, dear, that the flowers in the drawing-room must be freshly arranged—that you always do very nicely.’

Elsie readily undertook these duties, glad of anything which pleased and amused her aunt; whilst the latter busied her brain in picturing to herself how the arrival might be rendered most effective. The whole household, arrayed in their best, should line the entrance-hall, while a brass band playing martial airs outside might be a pleasing addition; but this last suggestion was overruled

by Trotter, the coachman, lest the horses should be startled.

A sad end, however, was put to all these preparations. The next day, just as the decoration of the drawing-room was completed, a telegram was brought in and handed to Mrs. Lindsay. She took up the yellow envelope, and dropped it as if it were a burning coal. 'Those dreadful telegrams!' she gasped. 'I *cannot* open it.'

Elsie picked it up. 'Open it, Aunt Caroline,' she said cheerily, 'it may be nothing.'

Thus encouraged, Mrs. Lindsay at length tore open the missive, which proved to be from David Lindsay, from London. 'Detained here by business—very sorry—hope to come to-morrow—will let you know.'

Mrs. Lindsay sank back in her chair panting.

'Oh dear, dear!' wailed Miss Maynard. 'After all our anticipations!'

'Tiresome creature!' said Elsie indignantly. 'I have no patience with him!'

'Hush!' said Mrs. Lindsay, raising her-

self. 'Control yourself, Cecilia!—Do not give way to temper, dear'—to Elsie. She sat upright, and looked around her with an air of lofty composure. 'Take away that bowl of roses,' she said presently; 'the perfume is overpowering. Cecilia, be kind enough to ring the bell.'

There was silence till Herbert appeared.

'Tell Howell,' said Mrs. Lindsay, 'that we shall *not* require the best china this evening. We shall *NOT* require it.'

When Herbert withdrew she rose majestically. 'I must go to my husband,' said she. 'Employ yourselves, my dears.'

Throughout the day Mrs. Lindsay maintained the heroic fortitude which had distinguished her conduct in the morning; the very unexpectedness of the shock brought with it an excitement which upheld her. During dinner, and while the General was in the room, she conversed upon every-day topics with studied cheerfulness; at other times she was impressively silent, only speaking when she saw occasion to enforce some moral lesson

upon her hearers. The next day passed in much the same manner, all mention of a possible visitor being avoided. Elsie asked, indeed, when she came downstairs in the morning whether Mr. Lindsay were coming, but her aunt merely waved her away with a shake of the head and a sweet smile of resignation, and after luncheon the party, with the exception of Elsie, set out for their usual afternoon drive.

CHAPTER X.

‘ . . . Wot’s a beauty?—the flower as blows.
But propuppy, propuppy sticks, an’ propuppy, propuppy graws.’

IN one of the midland counties, amidst fine pasture land and timber, stands a large and handsome house called Alkerton Priory. This property had been for some time in the market, and had only been taken possession of since Ladyday by its new owner, Mr. Fitzgerald. It was an old house, built of the rich-coloured yellow stone peculiar to the district; its stately front looked down upon green meadows, with groups of elm and oak trees, stretching away as far as the eye could reach, until they melted into the sky, and the wooded distance faded into a soft blue mist.

In front a sluggish river crept winding through the meadows, its course almost hidden by the thick grass. Only one dark

spot was to be seen upon the landscape, where a group of yew-trees cast their shadow, near a pond where white water-lilies grew, and on which a pair of swans were sailing. The garden was laid out in terraces, and there a number of peacocks were walking up and down, displaying their splendid plumage. The hot July sun poured down upon the mellow-tinted walls of the house, against which pink roses bloomed in rich clusters. But within all was cool, with the fragrant coolness of an old country house in summer time. The hour was about ten o'clock, and three people were at breakfast in the oak panelled dining-room. Places had been laid for four, but one was empty, and a well-filled tray had just been carried out by the butler, the delicacies with which it was heaped showing that, whatever might be the nature of the invalid's complaint, loss of appetite was not one of its symptoms.

Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald, who presided at the head of the table, had finished her breakfast, and was reading some letters with a dis-

contented air. David Lindsay, her eldest son, was standing at the window, trying to tempt the peacocks with bits of bread, while Lionel, the younger, having helped himself to a slice of melon at the side table, proceeded, after a pause of thoughtful consideration, to empty the contents of the cream-jug over it, and to eat it, slowly and critically, yet not without some appearance of approbation.

‘Well, mother, any news?’ asked David, throwing his last piece of bread at a sparrow, as the peacocks remained insensible to his blandishments.

‘A letter from Caroline Lindsay,’ replied his mother. ‘No news. I wish you would offer a visit there, David. They want you to come, but they don’t know when you are disengaged. Lionel, dear boy, you will make yourself *so* ill. Who ever heard of eating cream with melon?’

‘Ill!’ returned Lionel with scorn. ‘I wish there was anything to get ill upon. Cream, indeed! I don’t even call it milk. In

Devonshire we had at least cream if we had nothing else.'

'It *is* poor here,' said Lady Eleanor, looking sadly at the empty cream-jug. 'I detest the midland counties myself, but as it is dear Frederick's fancy I give way to it. I have sacrificed myself to my family all my life.'

Her sons exchanged glances expressive of some surprise at this statement, and Lady Eleanor resumed the perusal of her letter.

'Yes, David,' she said when she had finished, 'I think you should certainly go. The old General seems to be failing a good deal. Listen to what she says. "We are much interested in the mission for Ping-Yang"—that's not it—let me see—"a truly sweet and attractive young person,"—it must be on the other sheet. Oh! here it is. "My darling husband has recently been prostrated by two of his distressing attacks, one following the other, which have greatly reduced his strength."'

'What's that about an attractive young person?' asked David, who appeared to

have been more interested in the former paragraph.

‘Oh, nothing at all. Some girl she has living with her,’ said Lady Eleanor impatiently. ‘But really, David, you ought to go and see the poor old man who has always been so fond of you. It would be a real kindness.’

‘And who knows,’ said Lionel, rising from the table as he spoke, ‘that the old boy might not come down handsome in his will?’

‘Peace with thy scurrilous jests,’ said David. ‘Well, mother, I don’t mind if I do proffer myself as a guest at the Elms for a short time, particularly as there is a young lady there possessed of so many charms. I should like to hear about her.’

‘Nonsense, David! I do wish you would not make yourself ridiculous. This is a girl she seems to have adopted, and of course she will rave about her. Elsie Ross is her name; she comes from Scotland. There is nothing particular about her.’

David assumed a meditative air. ‘If you

seriously think, mother, that she is *not* attractive,' said he slowly, 'it might be best, all things considered, not to go there at present.'

'Then, David, it is very selfish and wrong of you, quite wrong I call it, to neglect a clear duty. Supposing the old man were to die—he might go off at any time in one of these attacks—you would reproach yourself all your life long.'

'He would indeed,' put in Lionel solemnly.

'And this girl has no claim upon him whatever. I don't suppose she will have a penny. She may be pretty; I daresay she is. Her mother was a sweet creature, and so distinguished looking; she was a cousin of your poor father's. But she chose to go and bury herself at some little Scotch farm——'

'And she's dead—is she?' asked David.

'Oh yes! years and years ago. And this girl, brought up amongst boors and——'

'Bullocks?' suggested Lionel.

'What sort of manners can you expect her to have! But all Caroline Lindsay's geese are swans.'

With these words, intended to arm David against the snares of beauty unaccompanied by merit (or wealth, which is the same thing), Lady Eleanor sailed away, followed presently by her two sons.

The brothers were a marked contrast to each other. Both were handsome ; David, the elder by nearly five years, was tall, bronzed, and active-looking, with bright blue eyes and a pleasant smile. He had not long since returned from India on leave from his regiment, and having been absent from home for three years, everything was new to him, and he was disposed to be amused and pleased by all that went on around him. He was naturally of a cheerful, buoyant disposition, and owing to this, perhaps, and his good health, he had got through life so far easily and pleasantly, and had never given his mother the least uneasiness ; whereas Lionel, with his delicate health and wayward temper, had been a perpetual source of anxiety and disappointment. Yet it was on Lionel that by far the most of her motherly

affection was expended. He resembled her very closely in features; he had been a beautiful child, and was now a handsome lad of eighteen, with large liquid brown eyes, straight features, and masses of rich dark curly hair, which he wore too long to suit David's soldierly ideas. But the chief unlikeness to his brother consisted in the listlessness and languor of his whole manner. Every turn and movement betokened that indolence which was the chief characteristic of the spoilt boy. As he had been thought too delicate to go to a public school, he had been sent to one private tutor after another, learning as little as he chose from each, and leaving as soon as he got tired of his surroundings. And now he was reading to enter Oxford, spending two hours of each day with Mr. Blandford, a neighbouring clergyman, who had undertaken to coach him.

The only study, however, which seemed to rouse him to a real interest, was that of music, for which he had an uncommon taste

and talent. He had now almost outgrown his boyish delicacy, and David's prospects were at present the objects of his mother's chief concern.

For Lady Eleanor had long since planned both her sons' future lives for them, which she felt herself perfectly competent to do, having all her life succeeded in getting her own way somehow. David, who was the heir to Ardvoira, a small West Highland property, and had distant expectations of a Scotch peerage, would not be at all well off, and 'must marry money,' while Lionel, who, she was resolved, should be his stepfather's heir, could afford to marry whom he pleased, subject of course to her approval.

The two brothers strolled out together, and the family did not meet again till luncheon, at which meal Mr. Fitzgerald assisted.

Lady Eleanor's second husband was Irish by birth, though he had never visited his native country since his childhood. His father had been a merchant in Liverpool,

and from him Mr. Fitzgerald had inherited a large fortune.

He was a quiet-looking man, with a particularly soft voice and mild deportment, and was entirely thrown into the shade by his handsome and stately wife. No one, to judge by his appearance and manner, would believe that he had quarrelled with all his neighbours in Devonshire, and had not a single relation of his own with whom he was on speaking terms. He was, however, a kind and affectionate husband, and was upon the whole very indulgent to his stepsons, though he had some peculiarities of temper, and was excessively fanciful about his health.

‘Do you feel equal to a drive this afternoon, Frederick?’ inquired Lady Eleanor.

‘A drive, my dear Eleanor? You forget that none of the horses are fit to go out at present.’

Mr. Fitzgerald kept very fine horses, which he was apt to consider too delicate and expensive to be used.

‘They never are fit to go out, it seems to

me,' said Lady Eleanor. 'I suppose you keep them for the grooms to ride.'

'You must take the pony carriage to-day if you wish to drive,' said Mr. Fitzgerald. 'The roan mare could go, I daresay. And do pray, Eleanor, go and call upon the Freemans; they are our nearest neighbours, and you have never yet returned their visit.'

'Well, if you will drive me——' began his wife.

'I fear I am quite unequal to the exertion. You, David—or Lionel, can drive your mother.'

'It would do you all the good in the world to go out,' said Lady Eleanor, displeased. 'And I see no occasion to call upon the Freemans.'

'Mr. Freeman is an excellent man,' said Mr. Fitzgerald, who had never seen him. 'I esteem and respect him highly.'

'He is a true-born Briton,' observed Lionel, 'one of that noble Saxon race whose soul ever disdained a foreign yoke.'

‘How do you know that, Lionel?’ asked David.

‘He said so himself, and he ought to know,’ replied Lionel. ‘I have been reading his speech at the county meetings, and so apparently has papa. You ought certainly to cultivate their acquaintance, mother.’

‘How am I to call upon them?’ said Lady Eleanor. ‘Nobody can get in at their gate.’

‘That big gate does not open,’ said David. ‘Most of the entrance-gates hereabouts are constructed on principles which prevent their ever opening. You go in at a little side door.’

‘They are Anglo-Saxon gates,’ explained Lionel, ‘and were erected to resist William the Conqueror.’

‘Which of you two is going to drive me?’ inquired their mother, who had now no intention of letting them off.

‘You will find David exactly adapted for the office, mother. He knows all about Anglo-Saxon gateways, you see. You take her, David, like a good fellow.’

David made no objection. He was the one of the family who generally did any little duty which the others found too irksome, and the pony carriage was ordered forthwith.

CHAPTER XI.

‘ We have no title-deeds to house or lands ;
Owners and occupants of earlier dates
From graves forgotten stretch their dusty hands,
And hold in mortmain still their old estates.’

BULCOTE MANOR, the residence of the Freemans, was distant from the Priory about three miles by the road. There was a short cut to it across the meadows, which in summer formed a very pleasant walk ; but as there were two stiles to be got over, besides having to cross the river by a plank, Lady Eleanor found it easier, as well as more dignified, to drive on the occasion of this her first visit.

Their way led along a pretty road bordered by tall trees, but as these had been lopped of their lower branches, they did not afford much shade from the baking

sun. The roan mare tossed her head and switched her tail incessantly as they jogged along, trying to free herself from the flies which kept settling on her in black clusters.

‘Really this stifling heat is unendurable,’ said Lady Eleanor, putting up her parasol. ‘What must it be in London! The girls will be glad to get into the country, I daresay.’

‘What girls?’ asked David.

‘The Mortimer girls—your cousins. I expect them here next week. Your aunt writes that Constance is quite worn out.’

‘To be sure,’ said David, ‘I forgot. Are they all grown up now? I remember Rosamond and Constance, and a little one.’

‘Blanche—oh yes! she was presented this year. She is a fine-looking girl, but none of them are half as pretty as poor Rose.’

‘Is Rose coming too?’

‘No, she is going home. I suppose she does not exactly like to leave that husband of hers any longer. Poor thing! what a mistake that marriage was.’

‘If she chose to marry that ruffian,’ said David with some severity, ‘I do not see why she is to be pitied if it turned out a mistake.’

‘Not to be pitied!’ exclaimed his mother. ‘How could she know he would go mad, and have to be shut up?’

‘If he’s shut up, why does she not want to leave him?’

‘You are dreadfully matter-of-fact, dear David,’ said Lady Eleanor impatiently. ‘He is not shut up always—only when he is violent. Though *I* think it a very great pity she ever lets him out. I consider your uncle and aunt very much to blame,’ she continued, ‘first to make her marry the man, when they knew what his character was, and now they take no steps to have him put under proper restraint.’

‘Did she not marry him of her own free will then?’

‘My dear boy, you need not look so fierce! I don’t suppose she was in love with him—but everybody thought it such a good match—and so it was, if he could only have kept

sober. It was quite against *my* advice though, I am glad to say.'

David said nothing, but his face grew so dark that his mother was puzzled.

'Can he have cared for Rose?' she thought. 'Impossible though—he was such a mere boy.'

She would have liked to question him, but scarcely dared to do so at that moment; David's unusually stern expression almost frightened her, and the next turn of the road brought them in sight of Bulcote Manor.

It was a picturesque-looking house, with irregular gables, and high, narrow latticed windows; it was built of the same yellow stone as Alkerton Priory, and was probably of still older date. No creepers grew upon its walls, but lichens, gray and yellow and white, made its tone still more subdued. The red-tiled roof had become a purple-brown from age, almost crimson in places, and stained here and there with patches of golden lichen.

The narrow road up which they had last turned led them past the front of the house, where was a square grass plot, or green court, as it was called, surrounded by high hedges of yew and privet. Just in front frowned the gate which had formed the subject of discussion at luncheon, and from which no drive led to the house, but the green turf grew close up to the gate. There were no flowers, indeed there they would have seemed almost out of place; all was cool, green, and quiet. A few paces farther on, half hidden by the bushes, there was an opening just wide enough to admit a carriage; it led past the house to the stables and outhouses at the back, while at the side a small green door in the yew hedge gave admittance by a flagged path, leading through the green court into the house.

‘Now, David,’ said Lady Eleanor in a tone of triumph, as they came to the fast shut gate, ‘how are we going to get in? This is exactly what I told Frederick, but no one attends to what *I* say.’

‘It is all right,’ replied David, ‘it is not meant to be opened. See, here is where we drive up.’

‘I will not drive up there,’ said Lady Eleanor. ‘Nothing shall induce me—a most dangerous turn. Stop, David, I desire you. I insist upon your opening that gate.’

David endeavoured to remonstrate, but in vain. Lady Eleanor was rather nervous in a carriage; the roan mare began to fidget and to back, and the corner was really a little awkward to turn.

‘David, I shall get out.’

She was actually on the point of doing so, and David pulled up.

‘Do let me drive you to the door quietly,’ he said, much annoyed. ‘It isn’t respectable to stand here wrangling before the people’s windows.’

‘I will not,’ said Lady Eleanor, getting out, and regaining her dignity as she reached *terra firma*, ‘I shall sit here until that gate is opened.’

‘Very good,’ replied David, who was now

thoroughly out of temper, 'you will sit some time then.'

So saying, he was about to drive on, when he again received an unexpected check. A small, freckled boy, panting and very hot, burst suddenly through the hedge on the right-hand side of the road, startling the mare so much that she stood straight up on her hind legs, and remained for some seconds in that attitude.

'Papa sent me,' gasped the boy breathlessly. 'We are all making hay in the Bury Ham. If you're callers, you're to come there.'

'We *are* callers,' David responded meekly, 'but what and where, my young friend, is the Bury Ham?'

'Down there,' said the boy, pointing, and at the same moment a lady hurried up to them exclaiming—

'Oh dear! I was afraid there had been an accident. I hope no one is hurt.'

Lady Eleanor had by this time recovered from her alarm. 'Thank you, not at all,'

said she graciously, shaking hands with Mrs. Freeman. 'My son,' darting a revengeful glance at David, 'did not understand your entrance. But you are busy, and we are interrupting you—David——'

'Pray do not go,' said Mrs. Freeman eagerly. She was a fair, faded woman, with rather a harassed expression of face, and a high-pitched, plaintive voice.

'If your son will drive round, my little boy will show him the way. Oh! here is my husband. John, Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald is here, and——'

'Glad to see you, my lady,' said Mr. Freeman. 'Glad to see you too, young sir. Tommy! take that horse round to the stables.'

David and Tommy drove off together, and Mr. Freeman once more addressed himself to Lady Eleanor.

'You couldn't have come at a better time,' said he heartily. 'You'll see us all making hay; I allow no idle hands here, I can tell you. This way, my lady, come along.'

‘No, John,’ said Mrs. Freeman, ‘Lady Eleanor would rather come indoors.’

‘What! and lose the sight of the hay-making?’ exclaimed Mr. Freeman. ‘I tell you, we’re all there, down to the very sucking infant. Lady Eleanor never saw anything like it in her life, I’ll be bound.’

‘I shall be charmed to see it,’ said Lady Eleanor coldly, ‘I delight in the country, and in farming;’ and the party proceeded to the Bury Ham.

This was a large meadow, which lay to the right of the house, sloping down to the river, and presented a bright and busy scene, as every one upon the farm had turned out to help in tossing the hay.

All the young Freemans, too, were there, eleven in number; Edith, the eldest, holding the above-mentioned infant, while the intermediate ones were busy with forks, suited to their various sizes.

‘Now, youngsters!’ said the Squire, ‘work with a will, all of you. Here’s Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald come to look on. She doesn’t see

a sight like this in her fine London houses.' And Mr. Freeman set to work himself with great vigour.

He was a burly middle-aged man, with sandy hair, and a face rather like a bull-dog's, at present very red with his exertions. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and wore a broad straw hat.

Mrs. Freeman made room for Lady Eleanor on a bundle of hay by her side. Miss Edith, who was just grown up, and anxious that everybody should be aware of this fact, resigned the baby to her mother, and seated herself near them, lest perchance she should be confounded with her two next sisters, Bessie and Polly, who were still in the schoolroom. But Miss Goodenough, the governess, although a lady of a certain age, having instructed Mrs. Freeman when she was a girl, did not disdain to toss the hay, or rather to sprinkle it about in a ladylike manner.

David, with Tommy Freeman, now appeared, and were at once pressed into the service.

David took off his coat and set to work vigorously, whereupon Miss Edith, resuming her fork, recommenced her labours with an industry edifying to behold.

Lady Eleanor began to wonder how long this state of things would continue. Mrs. Freeman, whose stock of conversation was getting exhausted, at last inquired if she disliked the strong scent of the hay.

‘I think it charming,’ said Lady Eleanor, ‘quite charming ;’ and she surveyed the scene languidly.

‘You do not find it too warm ? Shall we not come into the house and have some tea ?’

Lady Eleanor again glanced at David, but seeing that he showed not the faintest sign of leaving off, she answered, ‘Thank you, Mrs. Freeman—if you are going in. The fact is’—rising and shaking the hay-seeds from her dress—‘I have been stung by a gnat. I am a martyr, a perfect martyr to insects.’

Mrs. Freeman handed the baby to her

daughter Bessie, bidding her find the nurse, and then led the way into the house.

‘We are paying you a regular visitation,’ Mrs. Freeman,’ said Lady Eleanor. ‘I do not know when that boy of mine will be able to tear himself away.’

‘It is particularly pleasant that you are here to-day, Lady Eleanor. Our neighbours at Alkerton used often to come and spend the day with us at hay-making time. My husband is so fond of keeping up old English customs; he never will have a machine to toss the hay.’

Lady Eleanor answered that old customs were exceedingly delightful, and Mrs. Freeman continued—

‘Yes, there was always a strong friendship kept up between Alkerton and Bulcote, although latterly we saw little of the poor old Squire. Poor Mr. Popham! he was quite broken down by his son’s death, but in his good days he used to tell the story of how, when his father went out riding, with his wife on a pillion behind him, on one

occasion they fell into a ditch, but were taken out, and dried at the hospitable mansion of the Freemans.'

'Perhaps you thought something of that sort had happened when we arrived,' said Lady Eleanor, whose wrath against David was in no way diminished by this narrative. 'Oh, this is the entrance. What a charming old place!' she added with genuine admiration as they walked up the flagged path through the green court.

'Do you think so?' said Mrs. Freeman. 'I should have liked some flowers, but——'

'Oh no!' said Lady Eleanor, 'it is perfect as it is. So picturesque—so thoroughly in keeping!'

She paused to look round her before going into the house. Mrs. Freeman pushed open the door, and they went into the hall. This was a large room, paved with stone, and having a wide and deep fireplace at one side; it contained no furniture except a long oaken table, a sideboard, and some chairs.

‘This is where we dine,’ said Mrs. Freeman. ‘There are so many of us, you see. My husband likes to have early dinner, with all his children round him.’

Lady Eleanor shuddered. ‘You are fortunate, Mrs. Freeman,’ said she, ‘in having all your children still with you. We mothers are seldom able to keep our sons long. Have you a tutor for your boys?’

‘No, they attend the grammar-school at Wroxbury daily. Mr. Bacon, the master, is an excellent man, and it is not far off. My husband likes to have all his children under his own eye. To-day they have a holiday for the hay-making; my husband thinks they ought to be trained to be useful. But I will ring for tea.’

She opened a door which led out of the hall into a little parlour, and rang the bell. ‘This is our sitting-room,’ said she.

Lady Eleanor glanced round. The furniture was scanty and rather the worse for wear; the carpet was threadbare, particularly in one part, which had been used by the

lesser children as a racecourse, and on the doors the paint had been kicked off as high up as the handles.

‘The door on the other side of the hall leads into the book-room,’ said Mrs. Freeman. ‘Should you care to see it?’

Her visitor assented, and they crossed the hall. The book-room corresponded in size to the parlour, and, except that the walls were lined with old books, presented much the same appearance.

‘There are some valuable books here,’ said Mrs. Freeman. ‘My husband is justly proud of his library, although he does not care to open a book himself; and I have not much time for reading.’

Here a tottering step was heard, and Mrs. Freeman went hastily into the hall, where an old gray-headed man-servant was seen slowly making his way to the parlour door.

‘Blencowe,’ said Mrs. Freeman, speaking very loud and distinctly, ‘bring tea into the parlour. *Tea*, Blencowe.’

The old man turned slowly round, and

scratched his head doubtfully. 'Tea?' said he after a short pause.

'Yes,' said Mrs. Freeman. 'Tea, and bread and butter, and cake.'

'*Cake?*' repeated Blencowe, looking as if this last was almost more than he could bear; but seeing that his mistress was not likely to be turned from her desperate resolve, he departed muttering to himself. The two ladies then went into the parlour, and after a considerable lapse of time, Blencowe returned empty handed. He went into a corner of the room, and after much apparent exertion, at last succeeded in bringing forward a small three-legged table, which he placed before his mistress' chair. He then proceeded to rap it several times with the palm of his hand, in order to see if it was steady. Finding that it was decidedly shaky, he uttered a satisfied grunt and went away again. After another ten minutes the aged Blencowe returned, not, as Lady Eleanor had fondly hoped, with the tea-tray, but with a small chip of wood in his hand, which he carefully fixed under the

shaky leg ; then rising, he smote the table as before.

‘That will do, Blencowe,’ said Mrs. Freeman wearily. Blencowe gave the table a final rap, then went off again, and came back, this time with a cloth. Having spread it, he again shambled away, and after another long interval, the tea-tray was borne in in triumph. Setting it down cautiously on the table, the old man panted out—

‘Best not go for to shake that, now.’

Finally, a plate of thick bread and butter and a large home-made cake were brought, and Blencowe having remained a few minutes to contemplate his handiwork, and to ascertain if his mistress stood in need of any further advice, at length thought fit to retire, and was seen no more.

‘Poor old Jacob Blencowe!’ said Mrs. Freeman, beginning to pour out tea. ‘He has served my husband’s family faithfully for fifty years, and he will not give up working, though he is certainly too old. We do all we can to spare him.’

Lady Eleanor was much shocked at this speech ; she earnestly represented to her hostess, to whom she had taken rather a fancy, the extreme undesirability of keeping old servants ; a race of beings at whose hands she declared herself to have suffered 'an absolute martyrdom' during her early married life.

Meanwhile David, feeling that he had sufficiently done his duty in the matter of hay-making, informed Mr. Freeman that he feared he must reluctantly abandon that delightful pursuit.

'Ho!' said the Squire, as he wiped the moisture from his brow, 'had enough of it, I daresay.'

'Not at all,' protested David, putting on his coat. 'I should be delighted to go on for—for any length of time. But I have to drive my mother home, you know.'

'Well, you have earned a drink,' said Mr. Freeman, laying down his fork, but not resuming his coat. 'Have a taste of my home-brewed.'

They walked together to the house, the troop of children, led by Miss Goodenough and Edith, following them.

‘You don’t know much of farming, I suppose,’ said Mr. Freeman.

‘Well, I’ve not been brought up to it exactly,’ replied David. ‘I’ve been in India with my regiment; and my people never owned a property till now.’

‘*My* family,’ said the Squire, ‘have lived on this soil since the days of King Alfred. We’ve been farmers for generations, and I ain’t ashamed of it. We’re respected in the neighbourhood, I can tell you.’

Here a labourer passing touched his hat.

‘They all do that,’ said the Squire; ‘they touch their hats to me—plain John Freeman—as readily as to the Duke of Brazenose.’

David expressed the satisfaction which this happy state of things afforded him, and the Squire continued: ‘It’s all very fine to have a handle to your name, and so forth, but the Duke is not one whit more respected than I am. Not but what he’s a civil man

enough, as dukes go,' said Mr. Freeman charitably. 'He never passes my gate without saying, "How d'ye do, Freeman? Fine weather for the crops"—or the like. Once he asked leave to make a short cut through my spinney. I gave it to him too'—in a meditative tone. 'I'm not against doing a good turn to a neighbour. But now for the home-brewed.'

They had by this time reached the hall, and the Squire, taking two huge tankards from the sideboard, despatched Edith, who was close behind, to get them filled with ale. The rest of the children tumbled in a body into the parlour, followed by Miss Good-enough, who endeavoured to exercise some slight restraint upon the younger members. Edith joined them as soon as she had fetched the ale. And now a general clamour began in the parlour.

'Mamma, may I have some tea?'

'May I have some too, mamma?'

'And I?' 'and I?'

'Oh, mamma! I *want* some cake!'

‘I cannot possibly give you all tea,’ said Mrs. Freeman in her plaintive, oppressed voice. ‘You may finish the bread and butter, if you like. Miss Goodenough, will you take a cup of tea? Edith dear, here is yours.’

The children’s attention having been directed to the bread and butter, there was quiet for a moment, then again the outcry arose—

‘Mamma, my piece had no butter on it.’

‘Mamma, Edwy’s piece was much bigger than mine.’

‘Mamma, Alfred’s taken the last.’

‘Mayn’t I have some cake, mamma?’

Mrs. Freeman cut two large slices of cake into fragments, and distributed them impartially; and at the same moment the Squire and David made their appearance. Mrs. Freeman offered the latter some tea, which he declined, and asked leave to fetch the carriage. The children, with whom he seemed to have become rather popular, accompanied him in a body, slamming the

door violently as they went out. Lady Eleanor once more shuddered visibly.

‘And how do you like Alkerton, my lady?’ inquired Mr. Freeman, crossing his legs; he had thrown himself into his arm-chair.

‘I have hardly been there long enough to judge,’ replied Lady Eleanor in her most chilling tone; ‘it is extremely inconvenient in many ways.’

‘Oh! I daresay you feel being so far from church,’ said Mrs. Freeman sympathetically.

‘Well, that is undoubtedly a great drawback,’ said Lady Eleanor, to whom this disadvantage now occurred for the first time; ‘and then the utter want of servants’ accommodation——’

‘I don’t know about that, I am sure,’ said the Squire. ‘Fine old place, though; historical, they say. I don’t pretend to know much of these matters, but Miss Goodenough here will tell you. She has it all at her fingers’-ends.’

‘Alkerton Priory,’ said Miss Goodenough,

opening her mouth in instruction, 'was built about the commencement of the fifteenth century; it has since been greatly altered and added to. It was taken possession of by Master Wilfred Popham, after the ejection of the monks by Henry VIII.'

'A fine old Saxon family, the Pophams,' put in the Squire.

'Yes,' said Miss Goodenough, 'a brave, but unfortunate race. Misfortune, it was formerly believed, pursued the sacrilegious possessor of church lands, and this remnant of Romish superstition acquired some credence in the minds of the ignorant peasantry in this neighbourhood from the fact that from first to last the family of Popham has been subject to a series of the direst calamities.'

'Really?' said Lady Eleanor, rather startled.

'This is not very pleasant hearing for Lady Eleanor,' said Mrs. Freeman. 'You must not think——'

'Pshaw!' said the Squire, 'a pack of papistical rubbish. It was a happy day for

England when the rascally old monks were cleared out. As to the Pophams, to be sure the old Squire did lose his money, and his eldest son broke his neck out hunting, but what has that to do with church lands, I should like to know?’

‘At any rate, let us hope that the monks’ vengeance was satisfied upon the Pophams,’ said Lady Eleanor.

Half a dozen or so of the children now burst into the room to announce that the carriage had come, and Lady Eleanor and David, having made their adieux with many polite acknowledgments of the delightful afternoon they had spent, at length drove off, and reached home without further adventure.

The drive was accomplished almost in silence, for Lady Eleanor met all her son’s attempts at conversation with such determined ill-humour that he judged it more prudent to leave her to her own reflections. Had David seemed disposed to be aggrieved or out of temper himself, her own injuries would have been forgotten, and she would

have found a virtuous satisfaction in lecturing him on the disobliging and uncharitable spirit which he displayed ; but David, although he made some wry faces over the recollection of the home-brewed ale, seemed to have been rather exhilarated than otherwise by his afternoon's work. Therefore, his having left her for nearly an hour and a half with a neighbour with whom she did not care to become intimate was an offence which she was not then disposed to condone.

At the hall door they were met by Lionel. 'Well!' said he, 'have you only just come back? The Anglo-Saxon gate did not then succeed in repelling the Norman invader?'

'You boys are always talking about Anglo-Saxons,' said Lady Eleanor indignantly, as she swept into the house. 'And *I* consider it an exceedingly poor joke.'

CHAPTER XII.

‘ And though I stood abasit for a lite,
No wonder was ; for why ? my wittis all
Were so o’ercome with pleasance and delight—
Only through letting of my eyen fall—
That suddenly my heart became her thrall
For ever of free will, for of menace
There was no token in her sweete face.’

BEFORE David could carry out his intention of offering a visit to his relations at Chippingham, a letter arrived from Mr. Macdonald of Ardvoira requiring his immediate presence in London about some business connected with the estate. Mr. Macdonald was an old infirm man, and David, who was his cousin and next heir, was glad to be able to relieve him of any troublesome business transactions to which the old man was unequal.

‘ I shall have to go up to town this afternoon,’ he observed at breakfast one morning,

a day or two after the visit to the Freemans. 'Old Ardvoira seems very urgent that I should see Turnbull at once, as he happens to be in London.'

'Why, what is the matter?' asked Lady Eleanor.

'Some business about the rents,' replied David, who was not inclined to be very communicative about his affairs, 'and seeing this chap now will save me a journey to Glasgow. I don't want to go to Scotland before the Twelfth.'

'Why not start at once?' said Mr. Fitzgerald, who, arrayed in a gorgeous Japanese dressing-gown, was breakfasting with his family that morning. 'You young men are always procrastinating. You could be ready in half an hour.'

'You could go down to Chippingham on your way back, David,' said his mother, who had been meditating upon her own schemes. 'It would not be much out of your way.'

'And there you could make love to the

fair Elsie Ross,' said Lionel. 'Allow *me* to contribute a suggestion.'

'You speak like a book, mother,' said David, ignoring the proposals of the other members of his family. 'I'll write to the General as soon as I see my way.'

'Whilst you are away, I shall have your room put to rights—*scrubbed*,' said Lady Eleanor resolutely. 'The house has been left in a disgraceful condition, so Mrs. Betts tells me.'

'Good heavens!' exclaimed David, 'scrubbed? what a violent proceeding! I am sure it is quite clean.'

'As to you, Lionel,' she continued, 'your room is worse than David's. You will have to turn out, and live in the west wing for a few days.'

'Why?' said Lionel sulkily. 'I'm not going to have my room scrubbed. It's a—a beastly thing to do.'

'Do *not* talk such nonsense,' said his mother. 'People must be clean, I suppose.'

'Clean?' retorted her son. 'There is

nothing more *filthy* than soap and water. It gets into the crevices and breeds a pestilence——'

'*Will* you be quiet, Lionel?' groaned Mr. Fitzgerald, holding his head. 'You are insupportable.'

'Why?' again demanded Lionel. 'I am only telling you that soap and water——'

'I am not sure that turpentine and beeswax——' began Lady Eleanor.

'Beeswax your grandmother!' shouted Lionel. 'Leave it alone altogether, I say.'

A hot argument then ensued between Lionel and his parents, which lasted during the whole of breakfast-time. David was thus left to arrange his plans as he liked best; by and by he proceeded leisurely to the stables, followed by Lionel, who only stopped at the door of the dining-room to have the last word by intimating his unalterable conviction that nothing putrefied, or bred a pestilence, so rapidly as soap and water when applied to a bedroom floor, unless it was beeswax and turpentine.

‘Poor old Freddy seems rather short in the temper just now,’ observed David, lighting a cigarette. ‘I fancy he is more so than he used to be. Uncomfortable in his inside, I suppose, poor old chap.’

‘He is always rather chippy on the days when he puts on that dressing-gown,’ said Lionel, ‘but he has got another which is worse; the one, you know, with Leviathan taking his pastime thereon. I don’t see any particular signs of decay about him, however. What train do you go by, David?’

‘2.48,’ replied David. ‘Why not come up to town with me, and get your hair cut?’

‘You forget, my dear fellow,’ said Lionel, puffing himself out in imitation of his stepfather, ‘that I am studying for my matriculation, and every moment is precious. Have I time to waste in personal decoration?’

‘It is true,’ said David seriously, ‘you never will pass, Lionel, if you go on as you are doing. And if you don’t get into Oxford, what the dickens are you going to do?’

‘I shall go to Australia. I have thought

of it often, and it is the only thing I am fit for.'

'Oh !' said David incredulously.

'So you see it does not matter whether I pass or not. Come and look at the hunters.'

They were in the stable by this time, and Lionel was examining with great interest the two hunters which were destined for his use in the coming winter, apparently oblivious of his lately expressed intention of leaving the country.

After a prolonged survey of the horses, Lionel somewhat ostentatiously informed his brother that he was now going to Mr. Blandford ; and on entering the library to fetch a book, he found his parents there holding a conference.

Lady Eleanor's mind was for the moment so full of David's prospects, that she could not rest till she had poured all her doubts and perplexities into her husband's ear. Mr. Fitzgerald was too much occupied with his own ailments to be a very sympathetic listener, but for this his wife cared little ;

it never occurred to her, apparently, that her own grievances were not the theme of everybody's thoughts, and a listener of some sort was a necessity to her.

'It is awkward this letter having come for David just now,' she said. 'Though if he does not take this opportunity of going to Chippingham, he'll never do it, and I should be *so* unhappy if he were to offend old General Lindsay, who has invited him twice since he came home.'

'Undoubtedly he ought to go,' said Mr. Fitzgerald. 'I do not comprehend your difficulty, my dear Eleanor.'

'Don't you know the Mortimers are coming here next week, and we shall have to make up a party? Then I wanted to ask Laura Stockton. Such a nice girl, you know—really a superior girl. The society of women like that is just what David needs. She is not like the general run of girls, thinking of nothing but amusement.'

'Exactly so,' said Mr. Fitzgerald. 'It is a most extraordinary thing, Eleanor, that

whenever I stretch out my left arm—in this manner—I feel the most exquisite pain.’

‘Do not stretch it out then, dearest Frederick, I implore you. And you know, on the death of an aunt, she will come into nearly £3000 a year.’

‘Can it proceed from the heart?’ inquired Mr. Fitzgerald irrelevantly.

‘Can what proceed?—oh, your arm; nonsense! you have kept it too long in one position. You see, there is no use in asking any nice girls whilst David is away.’

‘David is far better unmarried yet awhile, I should say. Why not leave him alone?’

‘He will be falling in love,’ said Lady Eleanor solemnly; ‘I know it. He is just at the age——’ At this moment the door opened; she stopped, but seeing it was only Lionel, she continued: ‘He is just the kind of boy to ruin himself by some imprudent attachment; and if we do not throw nice girls in his way, whose fault will it be but ours? I am not sure but that I ought to give Caroline Lindsay a hint. What do you

think? Those young men just home from India always want to marry every girl they see. Now you know they do, Frederick!’

Frederick appeared doubtful, but Lionel promptly replied for him: ‘Certainly they do, mother—a most immoral frame of mind. That is David’s condition to a T.’

‘Leave the room, sir!’ suddenly thundered Mr. Fitzgerald, rousing himself to a supreme effort. ‘Eleanor, that boy is *insufferable*.’

‘Lionel dear, do not be so tiresome,’ said his mother. ‘Why do you not go to your reading? Well, Frederick, I see your arm is paining you; come upstairs, and I will send for Pritchard.’

‘I am going,’ said Lionel with condescension. ‘Do not disturb yourselves on my account, I beg.’

He then very deliberately chose three books out of the shelves, after which he proceeded slowly to the door, stopping on his way to smell the flowers, and to make a careful examination of every object that he passed; then apparently changing his mind,

he went suddenly to the window, swung himself out, and disappeared. Mr. Fitzgerald groaned.

‘You are ruining that boy, Eleanor, and unless a severe course is taken with him, he will be a disgrace and a scandal to all with whom he is connected.’

‘You have excited yourself, Frederick,’ said Lady Eleanor coldly. ‘I suppose you forget that the doctor forbade all excitement ; but there is no use in talking to you whilst you are in this state.’

She left the room in displeasure, and went to find her elder son, but David kept himself well out of the way till luncheon time, and as he started on his journey immediately afterwards, she had no opportunity of speaking to him alone.

On his arrival in London, David went at once to the lodging of Mr. Turnbull, and, being requested to wait a little until that gentleman came in, he employed his leisure moments in writing a note to Mrs. Lindsay to offer a visit.

It turned out afterwards that he had been premature in making his plans, as the business which had brought him to town detained him longer than he expected ; and it was not till two or three days afterwards that he found himself at liberty. Whilst in the train on his way to Chippingham, he suddenly recollected that he had forgotten to let the Lindsays know exactly when to expect him, as he had promised to do in the telegram which he had despatched the day before.

‘It can’t matter much, however,’ he thought, ‘as they seldom have any visitors ; and if the house is full, I can but go away again.’

‘Well, Howell, how are you ? All well here ?’ said he, as the butler’s well-known face appeared at the door.

‘Thank you, sir, all tolerably well, sir. Glad to see you returned. The General and the ladies is out driving, sir.’

‘Oh !’ said David, pausing with his foot on the step.

‘But Miss Ross is in the garden, I believe,

sir. ' Shall I send to the station for your baggage ?'

' No, never mind, the porter is going to send it up.'

David walked into the drawing-room, and from the windows took a careful survey of the garden, in order to ascertain, if possible, what Miss Ross was like before making her acquaintance. He could see no one, however, so he stepped out through the window, and walked leisurely round.

The plants had been somewhat battered by the recent rain, and a hedge of sweet-peas, which had been laid flat, was just beginning to recover itself, but the sun now shone out bright and hot, and had already tinged the apricots on the south wall. The pond at the bottom of the garden was not visible from the drawing-room windows, and as David approached it, he caught sight of a girl's figure in a white dress, sitting on the garden bench. Her face was turned away, and she did not see him ; she seemed to be watching three or four white ducks, which

were swimming in the pond, and which, every now and then, reversed themselves, after the manner of ducks, and seemed capable of remaining head downwards in the water for a surprising length of time.

There was something listless and drooping in the girl's attitude ; from where David stood he could see the thick plaits of fair hair under her sailor hat, and note the graceful outlines of her figure. Across her knee she held the long stalk of a tall white lily, which had been broken by the rain. It was a pretty picture, the young man thought ; he wondered what the face would be like, when she should turn it round ; he wondered what she was thinking of so intently. Beside the girl, on the gravel walk, a little brown dog lay asleep in the sunshine ; it was stretched out in the attitude of a dead pig, and did not, therefore, add to the poetry of the scene.

David came a very little nearer ; the dead pig gave signs of returning life. A fly had settled on Hans's nose ; he sneezed, knitted his brows, and suddenly becoming aware of

an intruder, he growled fiercely, while every hair on his back and tail stood erect, 'like quills upon the fretful porcupine.' His mistress turned round, and David, taking off his hat, came forward hastily.

'I have arrived unexpectedly, I fear. I hope I have not startled you,' he said.

Elsie rose, apparently not in the least startled or discomposed. 'Mr. Lindsay?' she said in a half-questioning voice.

Before she was aware of his presence, David had unconsciously been keeping himself from disappointment, by thinking that the face which was turned from him was probably plain; but he could find no fault with the small oval face, the delicate features, or the clear gray eyes which met his so frankly. He felt almost as embarrassed as if she could have read his thoughts, and only said rather awkwardly—

'We are cousins, I think.'

'I believe so,' said Elsie demurely. 'We have been expecting you, but Aunt Caroline did not know when you would arrive.'

They will be back from their drive very soon.'

She maintained some slight degree of severity in remembrance of his offence, but, mindful of the laws of hospitality, she was prepared to relent the moment she saw signs of contrition.

'The fact is, I forgot to send another telegram. I hope—do you know—is it inconvenient in any way?'

'Not in the least,' said Elsie cordially. 'Uncle Henry has been looking forward to seeing you. Hans!' turning to admonish him slightly with the stalk of her lily—'*will* you stop growling at your cousin!' for Hans had continued to protest in a sort of musical undertone, ever since the arrival of the stranger.

David laughed heartily, and stooped down to make friends with the little dog.

'My aunt used to have a pug,' he said.

'Yes,' replied Elsie, 'she has two, but they have gone out driving. Aunt Caroline will be disappointed not to have been in when

you came. She had prepared a grand reception for you yesterday,—but perhaps——’ hesitating a little—‘it may be just as—comfortable for you not to have it.’

‘Reception?’ said David; ‘you alarm me. What on earth was she going to do?’

‘Never mind, it won’t happen now—there is the carriage!’

If Elsie expected that the young man would at once joyfully hasten to greet his relatives, she was mistaken; for David lingered, and expressed his opinion that it was ‘only some one come to call.’

‘No, I saw the carriage. Howell will tell Aunt Caroline you are come; had you not better meet them?’

David rose reluctantly. ‘Are not you coming in?’ he said.

‘I shall come by and by,’ replied Elsie placidly; and he had no choice but to depart.

From her garden-seat she presently heard the loud barking of the pugs, followed by a chorus of exclamations, and smiled a little to herself. She waited until she thought

that the first raptures had had time to subside, and then went in to make the tea, as was her daily duty.

On entering the drawing-room she found Aunt Caroline seated beside David on the sofa, holding his hand tenderly between both hers, and gazing with fond affection into his face, whilst the General and Miss Maynard occupied positions in the background.

Elsie was glad to see that her aunt's disappointment was wholly forgotten, and that her uncle appeared to be in the best of spirits. At dinner there was quite a lively flow of talk and laughter ; no subject of conversation was frowned upon or fraught with severe moral lessons ; the Elms seemed like a different house, and Elsie breathed freely in the more genial atmosphere.

CHAPTER XIII.

‘As a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.’

ELSIE felt grateful to David Lindsay for the new life which he had brought with him, and could not help finding him a most agreeable companion to herself; while he, on his part, was unconsciously fulfilling his mother’s prediction, by falling in love with the first girl he saw.

Elsie’s beauty attracted him in the first place, and then her utter ignorance of the world, her unlikeness to other girls, and her disposition to look up to and admire his superior knowledge, combined to render her perfect in his eyes. He thought her the loveliest creature the sun ever shone upon, and every moment seemed wasted which was not spent in her society. The visit of a few

days, which he had intended to make, lengthened itself out indefinitely, to the great content of his uncle and aunt. As Elsie had once expressed herself glad that her uncle should be kept happy and amused, David exerted himself to the utmost to please the old man, and, indeed, he would have undertaken a far more difficult task to win from her the least token of approval.

Although he could not discover from Elsie's manner the smallest sign that she returned his feelings, she treated him with great cordiality, and they were soon on intimate terms. Very early in their acquaintance David had suggested that it was the privilege of cousins to call each other by their Christian names; a piece of information which Elsie received with meekness, and immediately acted upon.

'I have never had any cousins before,' she said one day—'none that I knew, at least.'

She and David were supposed to be playing lawn tennis, but, having soon become

exhausted by the exercise, were now sitting together on the grass.

‘How is it that you were never here before?’ said David.

‘Why am I here now? you had better ask. I had not a stepmother before, and I was the only one at home, you see.’

‘Odd that we should both be afflicted with a step-parent. We ought to have great sympathy with one another on that account,’ observed David sentimentally.

‘But your stepfather is very nice, is he not?’

‘Poor old Freddy! I suppose he is. He is a terrible fellow for quarrelling with his neighbours, but he was always very kind to us.’

‘That’s like papa. *He* quarrelled with his neighbour—he has only got one—and I think it was a great pity.’

‘Do you mind telling me the subject of dispute?’

‘It was a raven,’ replied Elsie. ‘Lord Ochil kept a tame raven, and it used to

bite my father's legs when he went to call.'

'Oh!' said David, 'I don't wonder he was hurt.'

'His legs were not,' said Elsie laughing, 'because he always wears very strong gaiters, but—I suppose his feelings were. The raven never bit any one else, and he thought Lord Ochil kept it on purpose to annoy him. But what did Mr. Fitzgerald quarrel about?'

'The occasions were so numerous,' said David, 'I forget most of them. The last was about a carpet-bag, if I recollect right; I rather think that was the cause of our leaving Devonshire.'

'Do you call your stepfather Freddy or Frederick?' inquired Elsie after a long and serious pause.

David laughed. 'I don't exactly call him either, Elsie.'

'I have always said "Euphemia" in speaking to my stepmother, although it sounds rather familiar; that is why I ask you. What *do* you call him, David?'

‘Well, I—a—in fact, I call him papa,’ replied David, blushing. ‘It is his own wish,’ he added, recovering himself, ‘and one does not like to annoy him by refusing. If he expressed a desire to be called Old Nick, I should waive my scruples and consent.’

‘You are quite right,’ said Elsie gravely. ‘Shall we have another game?’

David very soon made it his daily practice to present himself in the drawing-room during Elsie’s hours of study; and after making himself agreeable to Miss Maynard for a few minutes, he generally induced her pupil to leave her books and come out with him; and gradually he contrived that he and Elsie should be together almost the whole day long. Of course this could not go on without Mrs. Lindsay’s knowledge, but the idea of David as Elsie’s lover did not, at first, enter her mind.

When in his aunt’s presence, David took little notice of Elsie, appearing to be entirely engrossed with Aunt Caroline, who, in the excitement of her nephew’s visit, forgot to

take her usual interest in all Elsie's proceedings. She attributed the length of David's stay entirely to his attachment to herself. 'Dear good fellow!' she observed to Elsie; 'he appreciates so much the privileges of a truly Christian home. Poor Eleanor is, I fear, sadly given up to the world.'

Being desirous of exhibiting her Indian hero to the neighbourhood, Mrs. Lindsay not only took him with her to any festivities that were going on, but even gave a garden party at the Elms, an event which had been unheard of for years, and which was on a scale of splendour calculated to strike awe into the hearts of the Chippingham population. David expressed himself delighted with all these entertainments, as well he might; for did not Elsie grace them all with her sweet presence, and did not she far outshine the innumerable maidens who, in their freshest muslin dresses, thronged the lawns and gardens?

Still, he preferred to have her society alone, and soon found that in the grounds they were much too liable to interruption.

‘Why should we not have a boat?’ he said one day. ‘Do you ever go on the river, Elsie?’

‘I should *love* it,’ said Elsie; ‘but I do not believe we may. Uncle Henry once had an attack because I walked by the river.’

‘By yourself?’ said David. ‘I don’t wonder. I should say that was calculated to produce the very worst effects upon him. But with *me*—that is a very different thing.’

‘You really think I ought not to walk alone? I thought it such nonsense. They do not even like me to go on the road for fear of meeting a tramp—as if tramps ever did anything to anybody!’

‘Ladies are generally afraid of tramps,’ said David. ‘I do not know that they are usually ferocious; but I consider it most undesirable for you to walk by yourself. It’s enough to give anybody a fit—an attack, to think of it.’

‘Ah, well!’ said Elsie, ‘perhaps you have the Lindsay constitution.’

The proposal of taking Elsie on the river

did not find favour in Mrs. Lindsay's eyes ; and she was now becoming rather suspicious of the fraternal affection which she believed to exist between her nephew and niece. In one of her confidential talks with David she had spoken enthusiastically of Mr. Maynard, of his worth and talents, and hinted at the desirability of Elsie being settled near her. David had not said much in reply, but she was struck by his evident dislike of the notion, and he had very soon made an excuse to leave her and go out. A few minutes later she saw him and Elsie, apparently in earnest conversation, walking leisurely through the paddock in the direction of the river. From that moment she determined to be on her guard, and not permit the close intercourse which had hitherto existed between the cousins.

‘Where are you going, dear?’ she said that same afternoon, as Elsie reappeared in the drawing-room after tea with her hat on.

‘David and I were going to play tennis,’

was the answer; and David opened the window for her to step out.

‘By diligent practice I hope to make a good player of her in time, Aunt Caroline,’ he said as he followed her.

Mrs. Lindsay waited till the pair were gone, then she turned to Miss Maynard. ‘What are you *about*, Cecilia? allowing these young people to be constantly together without chaperonage?’ she said in her severest tones.

Miss Maynard let the work fall from her trembling hands, and looked up terrified. ‘I—I did not suppose——’ she faltered.

‘You did not suppose it was your duty to *guard* and to watch over your young charge?’ said Mrs. Lindsay indignantly. ‘Pray, Cecilia, for what purpose did Providence bestow reason and eyesight upon you? Now, dry your eyes’—for Cecilia had already taken out her pocket-handkerchief—‘put on your bonnet, and go *at once* to the tennis-ground. Prompt and decided action may do much. You cannot efface the past, but you may atone for it in the future.’

The players had not yet begun their game when Miss Maynard hurried towards them.

‘Is anything wrong?’ asked Elsie, as she went up to her and gently put her bonnet straight.

‘No, no, dear,’ said Miss Maynard tremulously; ‘I came to sit here a little and watch your game.’

‘And so you shall,’ said Elsie, looking round, ‘but the grass is damp just here. If she had a chair, David, or a rug—wait, I will fetch one.’

David ran after her. ‘Must she sit here?’ he whispered. ‘It is nonsense, you know; she will get rheumatism.’

‘She shall sit where she likes, poor dear,’ said Elsie, who had observed the traces of tears on Miss Maynard’s countenance. ‘You get her a chair, David, and I will fetch the rug.’

David fetched both, and a footstool as well; Miss Maynard was comfortably placed, and the game proceeded, but not with great spirit. When the set was finished, David

again inquired with much solicitude whether Miss Maynard did not find it damp.

‘Not at all, thank you,’ she replied ; ‘not at all, but I am sure you have played enough ; you will tire yourselves.’

Elsie laid down her racquet obediently, and came and sat down on a corner of the rug, while David stretched himself on the grass, and began to play with the balls in rather a gloomy manner. As he did so, one of them accidentally struck Hans, who uttered a loud squeak, but finding to his surprise and joy that he was unhurt, he began to scamper round the lawn in circles, as his custom was when delivered from any imminent danger. David could not help laughing.

‘Where *did* you get that little beast ?’ said he.

‘He came straight from Germany,’ replied Elsie, with pride, as she lifted Hans upon her knee. ‘Fräulein Meyer got him from her uncle, Herr Butterkäse, who is a very celebrated dog-fancier.’ She glanced at David as she spoke, to see if he appeared impressed

by this information, but Herr Butterkäse's fame had evidently not reached his ears before.

'I am afraid, after all, he is not a pure-bred dachshund,' she said, 'but I do not love him any the less on that account,' and she laid her soft cheek against his little brown head.

David drew nearer, in order to caress him also, saying insinuatingly, 'I think he would be the better of a walk; don't you?'

Miss Maynard hastily interposed. 'I think, dear, your aunt would wish you to come in; you have done quite enough.'

After that day David had very few opportunities of having any private conversations with Elsie, which annoyed him the more, as the 12th of August was approaching, and his visit must soon come to an end. He was bound to be in Scotland at that date, as old Mr. Macdonald had invited a shooting-party, and David was expected to entertain the guests; besides, he had arranged to travel with his friend Ponsonby, who was to meet

him in London, so that he could upon no pretext delay his departure. He felt that he could not leave Elsie without ascertaining her feelings towards him. True, he was not at present in a position to marry, and had, therefore, been inclined to hesitate before deliberately seeking to win her affections. But the hint about Mr. Maynard, which Mrs. Lindsay had thrown out, decided him to try his fate without delay. He knew that his aunt would never rest until she got her young charge married, or at least engaged.

‘And why not to me?’ thought David. ‘I shall be able to marry in a year or two at latest.’ But the opportunity to speak seemed denied him. He came into the drawing-room one morning during Elsie’s study hour, asked in a very downcast manner for a sheet of writing paper, and sat down to write a note, with an expression of the deepest melancholy upon his countenance. Elsie glanced at him furtively from time to time, as she was reading, wondering what had happened. Had he received bad news? had

anything disagreed with him? Presently Herbert came in with a message that a young person wished to see Miss Maynard in Parkins's room.

'One of my Friendly girls, dear,' said Miss Maynard, rising. 'How very inopportune! She has come to consult with me about a situation. Continue your reading, my love; I shall be back presently.'

As soon as she had gone David looked up; Elsie appeared to be reading diligently.

'Elsie!' said he softly.

'Is anything the matter, David? bad news or anything?'

'Not news, but—Elsie, I shall have to start for Scotland on Tuesday.'

'I see nothing bad about that,' said Elsie. She kept her face turned away, and spoke very quietly, but David noticed or fancied that there was the least possible tremor in her voice. Here was his opportunity, and he was not slow to avail himself of it. Miss Maynard's absence did not last long, but before the 'Friendly girl' had time to come

to a decision as to whether or not she could bring herself to wash the front-door steps (which was not her work at all, but Sarah's), these two young people had fully arrived at a mutual understanding. The sudden shutting of a door by and by recalled Elsie to herself; she looked round startled.

'Come out with me,' said David entreatingly. 'I have so much to say to you, and we do not know when we may have another chance;' and Elsie yielded.

'What will Aunt Caroline say?' was her first question.

'Never mind Aunt Caroline, *I* will talk to her. The thing may require a little explanation, but she will be quite pleased in the end. What your father will say is what I am more anxious about at present.'

'I do not see why my father should object,' said Elsie slowly, and with the air of one who impartially weighed the subject. 'I do not see that he need care, one way or the other. Why should he not give me to you as readily as to Aunt Caroline?'

‘My darling,’ replied David, ‘there is no reason why he shouldn’t, but every reason, on the contrary, why he should. And that is just what I hope to convince him of. But he might possibly think, just at first, you know, that we had not enough to live upon.’

‘Do you mean to go and see him, then? to go to Rossie?’ cried Elsie. ‘Oh, David, do! it would please him, I think. It would be better than writing.’

‘To be sure I mean to go. I shall go to St. Ethernans—that is your town, isn’t it? and walk out to Rossie and call some fine day.’

Elsie’s eyes shone. ‘You must go and see Aunt Grizel too,’ she said. ‘But where will you go for the night, David? She would take you in, I know, for my sake, and because you are a relation. She will be delighted to see you.’

‘I think I had better go to the inn, however. I suppose there is one?’

Elsie pondered. ‘There is the Star—but I don’t like your going to an inn, David; it

is dreadful, when you are a relation. And I doubt if it is very respectable. Much better go to Aunt Grizel; only be careful with your portmanteau, and do not scratch the paint off her front-door—she hates that.'

It was a great delight to Elsie that David thus intended to make acquaintance with her own people; she no longer felt so cut off from them, and they would be quite sure, she thought, to like him; how could they help it? She did not attach much importance to David's confession of poverty, except that it made her a little anxious that he should avoid unnecessary expense. She therefore once more warned him against the extortions of the St. Ethernans innkeepers, but on being assured by her lover that he could afford this outlay, she was satisfied, and the conversation wandered off to more interesting subjects.

They had forgotten to take any count of time, and it was nearly the hour for luncheon when an interruption came in the shape of William, the footman, who informed them

that the General wished to see Mr. Lindsay, as there was a telegram awaiting him.

Elsie, suddenly recalled to a sense of her neglect of duty, and the rudeness towards Miss Maynard of which she had been guilty, fled into the house and up to her own room with all speed, and joined the party at luncheon in some trepidation. Her absence, however, had passed unnoticed, except by Miss Maynard, who, though a good deal alarmed by it, had not dared to confess to Mrs. Lindsay that she had for the moment taken her eye off her pupil, whose disappearance would thus be traced to her guardian's negligence.

The arrival of a telegram for their nephew, although no very uncommon occurrence, had thrown both the General and Mrs. Lindsay into a state of the greatest perturbation, and messengers were despatched in all directions to find and bring him in. He met his uncle at the door, waving the envelope in great excitement, and demanding to know its contents. David read the message, crushed the

paper in his hand, and thrust it into his pocket with a look of annoyance.

‘Eh, what? what?’ said the General; ‘bad news, eh?’

‘No, no, General,’ said David, ‘it’s all right. It is from my mother. There is nothing in it to signify.’

‘David!’ said Mrs. Lindsay, who, wrapped in a shawl, had come out to support her husband, ‘why do you not tell your dear uncle the message? Do you not see how you are agitating him?’

‘My mother’s messages are apt to be a little confused,’ said David. ‘She says my stepfather is going to London to see his doctor; he has not been very well lately, you know. She wants me to meet him at Paddington this afternoon.’

‘Eh? to-day?’ said the General, ‘that’s quick work. And are you going?’

‘My dearest David, you cannot, surely, hesitate one moment!’ cried Aunt Caroline, who, having wound herself up to believe that this message was one of life or death, had no

notion of bringing down her mind to common-places. 'You must fly at once to your step-father's side ; you must lose not an instant !'

'I don't believe there is anything the matter with him,' said David doggedly. 'But there is no doubt I shall have to go,' he added, making an effort to throw off his irritation. 'I think his train arrives at 4.30. I am only sorry that my pleasant visit here has come to an end so unexpectedly.'

'Dear affectionate fellow!' murmured Aunt Caroline, pressing his hand to her heart.

The elders of the party were far too much excited to notice Elsie's pale and troubled looks, which were unobserved by all but David. Mrs. Lindsay, with the General and Miss Maynard, proposed to accompany her nephew to the station, as an object for their afternoon drive. Elsie was left at home, it was 'more judicious,' Mrs. Lindsay thought ; yet it gave the lovers time to exchange a parting word, whilst the ladies were putting on their bonnets.

As he bade her farewell, David cautioned Elsie to say nothing to Aunt Caroline of their engagement.

‘I have no time to explain it to her,’ he said hurriedly, ‘and if she were annoyed at first it would all fall on you. I shall come straight here when I leave Scotland, and then——’

‘It would be more *convenient* if she knew,’ said Elsie, looking troubled, ‘but I will do what you think best, David.’

‘The carriage is at the door, sir,’ said Howell.

Mrs. Lindsay was a little surprised that Elsie did not appear at the door to say good-bye to her cousin; she would have sent for her, but the bustle of getting into the carriage occupied some little time; and the General, one of whose constitutional infirmities was a nervous dread of being late for trains, would hear of no delay, and hustled them off with such rapidity that his own walking-stick, Miss Maynard’s parasol, and the pug Bijou were left behind in the confusion.

CHAPTER XIV.

‘You may train the eagle
To stoop to your fist,
Or you may inveigle
The phoenix of the East.

‘The lioness, ye may move her
To give o’er her prey,
But you’ll ne’er stop a lover,
He’ll find out his way.’

WHEN Elsie came down to prayers the next morning she found two letters awaiting her. One was addressed in Aunt Grizel’s well-known handwriting, the other, to her surprise, was from David. In the interval between prayers and breakfast she slipped upstairs to read it, not observing the awful sternness of the gaze which Aunt Caroline fixed upon her as she left the room.

David’s letter had been written as soon as he reached London ; it contained many loving

words, and expressions of deep regret at having been unable, through lack of time, to say all he wished, as well as to inform his aunt of their engagement. He concluded by recommending Elsie, on the whole, to keep the secret until his return ; but, if she would rather not do so, he would, on receipt of a letter from her, at once write to his aunt himself.

The breakfast-gong had sounded for at least two minutes before Elsie had finished the perusal of this, her first love-letter. She descended hastily, and tried to talk as usual, but all her remarks were received with chilling silence. She could not eat, and was fain to occupy herself with Aunt Grizel's letter, in order to screen herself from observation. As they left the table, Mrs. Lindsay, raising her voice, said, ' Elspeth ! In half an hour's time I shall wish to see you in my boudoir.'

Elsie felt for the moment as though the ground were crumbling away under her feet ; but the half-hour's space, which possibly Mrs. Lindsay had intended to add to the appalling

nature of the interview, and to increase the terror of the culprit, gave her time to collect herself, and to brace her resolution.

‘Of course it is about David,’ she thought. ‘Aunt Caroline knows, somehow ; but, after all, I have done nothing wrong, and I need not be afraid that David will give me up for Aunt Caroline, or for twenty Aunt Carolines ; so it would be perfect nonsense to give in to her. I wish she was not angry, all the same.’

Mrs. Lindsay was writing when Elsie entered the boudoir, and at first tried to appear as if she did not see her ; but as the girl stood waiting, she suddenly laid down her pen and said : ‘From whom was your letter this morning ?’

‘From David Lindsay,’ said Elsie, turning scarlet, but unhesitating.

Mrs. Lindsay took up her pen again, and fixed Elsie with her eye.

‘As long as you remain under my roof, Elspeth, I permit *no* clandestine correspondence with young men.’

‘Very well, Aunt Caroline, I shall carry on none.’

‘And I wish to know what passed between you and David Lindsay in the garden yesterday?’

‘David asked me to marry him, and I said I would.’

Mrs. Lindsay started off her seat, her eyes positively glowing like live coals; but as Elsie did not stir, she sat down again, laid her hand upon her heart, and fetched several deep breaths. When next she spoke, it was in a sepulchral tone.

‘David had *no* right to make such a proposition, nor had you to reply to it thus. A union between you is *impossible*, and even had it been otherwise, your conduct in this affair would have put it out of the question. To receive addresses in that manner, and in the *garden*! I can imagine nothing more forward and improper.’

‘It was in the drawing-room,’ murmured Elsie.

Mrs. Lindsay waved her hand, as if to

put her niece's words away from her. 'I am deeply disappointed in you. Henceforth, Elspeth, *all* communication between you and David is at an end.'

'May I not just answer his letter, Aunt Caroline, and tell him that I mayn't——'

'Answer his letter? Most assuredly not. Had you showed the confidence in me which I have a right to expect, you would *at once* have laid that letter before me.'

As Mrs. Lindsay said this, she gave her niece a searching look; but Elsie, adopting her father's frequent line of conduct, turned on her an utterly expressionless gaze, and made no reply.

'I myself,' said Aunt Caroline, 'will write to David Alexander Lindsay.'

Elsie was pleased to hear this, knowing that David would understand her position, but maintained her immobility by an effort.

'I am totally at a loss to understand you,' said her aunt, after a pause. 'What do you propose to yourself? To attempt to contract an engagement without a reference to those

who are placed by Providence in the position of parents and guardians to you? Have you no sense of filial duty? of the most sacred ties——’

‘I have had so little time,’ pleaded Elsie. ‘I meant to tell you——’

‘To tell me!’ exclaimed Aunt Caroline. ‘You ought to have consulted me beforehand. Now put out of your head all idea of any engagement between you and my nephew, and make the only reparation in your power, by writing a full confession to your father. Sit down at that table—you will find writing materials.’

But a demon of obstinacy seemed to have entered into Elsie.

‘I would rather not write to my father to-day, please. I wrote lately, and I have nothing to say to him.’

‘Nothing to say to him!!’ screamed Aunt Caroline. ‘Do you call this whole tissue of deceit and disobedience *nothing*?’

‘*He* would call it nothing,’ replied Elsie in an unmoved tone. ‘If I were to write

and say that I was engaged to David Lindsay, that would be a piece of news—papa likes news—but now there is no need to write that I am not engaged to David Lindsay; he would only say he never supposed I was.'

Mrs. Lindsay was baffled, and did not know what to make of the girl. She had never yet had an encounter with any young woman whom she had not speedily reduced to tears and submission; yet here was Elsie, whom she had always thought particularly soft and gentle, meeting her reproofs with cool impertinence, and without moving a muscle of her face. She signed to her to leave the room, merely remarking that she had not expected to find her affection repaid with heartless ingratitude. But this accusation, which to Mrs. Lindsay meant little, touched the girl at once, and brought her back, repentant, to her side.

'Ah no, Aunt Caroline! not ingratitude. You have been very good to me, and *indeed* I am not ungrateful.' She took her aunt's

hand and kissed it. 'But I promised David, and I cannot take it back.'

She left the room quickly, and Mrs. Lindsay sat still, astonished at feeling herself not nearly so angry as she had wished and intended to be. She remained a while pondering over Elsie's extraordinary character, and considering how she could exert her authority over that self-willed young person, without driving her to leave the Elms. At length, gathering herself up, she went with the whole story to her husband, but could get very little satisfaction from him, beyond the admission that a marriage between the young people was not to be thought of at present. When she came to the point of David's proposal to Elsie, and her answer, the General began to chuckle, which he continued to do during the rest of the narrative in so exasperating a manner, that his wife at last left him to enjoy his mirth in solitude. Finally, she proceeded to perform what she esteemed to be her sacred duty under the circumstances—that of writing to the relatives

of both the parties concerned, as well as to her nephew himself.

These letters produced, in due course, the following replies :—

Lady Eleanor wrote that ‘she was much obliged for her dear Caroline’s warning, but begged her not to distress herself by needless anxiety. Young men would be young men, but David’s heart, she felt sure, was in the right place. However, she would certainly make a point of speaking to him *most seriously*.’

To David, his mother wrote that she was ‘exceedingly shocked and distressed by the account of his conduct which she had received from Mrs. Lindsay. Of all things in the world, what she most disliked was a male flirt, and it gave her great pain to think that a son of hers was apparently becoming one. Some day he would find that he had gone too far, and she wished, in short, that he would come home at once, and explain what he meant by causing all his friends, and especially his anxious and affectionate mother, so much uneasiness.’

Elsie, in like manner, received a letter from her father, in which she was desired to 'put all that nonsense out of her head. She was too young to think of marrying for another ten years. As for this young man, he (the Laird) knew nothing about him, and anything he had heard was very little to his credit. If Elsie could not behave herself where she was she had better come home, but she was to do nothing without consulting her aunt, who seemed to be a very well-intentioned kind of woman.'

To Mrs. Lindsay, Captain Ross merely wrote a short, but courteously worded note, expressive of his great obligation to her for her care of his daughter, and offering to relieve her of the charge should she find it burdensome.

David's letter to Mrs. Lindsay was as follows :—

'MY DEAR AUNT CAROLINE—Your letter caused me the most sincere distress, and I trust you will believe that nothing but the

necessity for my instant departure prevented me from confiding to you my hopes and wishes. As it was, I judged it best to wait until I had a personal interview ; which I still venture to hope you will not refuse me when I return to Chippingham in September ; and when I have no doubt of being able to explain to your perfect satisfaction the motives by which I was actuated. One thing I must at once, however, strongly urge upon you ; that, if blame attaches to any one, your censure must, in justice, fall entirely upon me. Of my feelings towards my cousin (which are deeply rooted and unalterable), she was totally ignorant until the moment before I left ; and feeling that it was from me that you would naturally expect first to hear the avowal of my attachment, I requested her to postpone informing you of our engagement until my return. If I have caused distress by undue precipitation, which the ardour of my affection could alone excuse, I can only entreat her forgiveness and yours. As I have had the misfortune to incur your dis-

pleasure, I cannot, of course, expect you to receive me at the Elms ; I shall, therefore, put up at the King's Head at Chippingham, about the second week of September, which is the most speedy return I can hope to make, and shall then entreat you to grant me the interview which is so vitally necessary for the elucidation of my past conduct.—With kindest regards to all, believe me, my dear aunt, yours affectionately,

‘DAVID A. LINDSAY.’

The receipt of Mrs. Lindsay's letter, followed in a few days by his mother's, really caused David serious vexation. He blamed himself for his impatience, which had been the means of drawing down his aunt's displeasure upon Elsie, and he could not bear to think of her perhaps suffering from its effects, in the absence of her rightful protector. Yet he could neither return at once nor write to Elsie ; the latter course would only bring fresh trouble upon her. He made his letter to his aunt as conciliatory as he could, be-

stowing much thought upon its composition, and carefully looking out all the long words in the dictionary, in case of possible mistakes in spelling; and he determined that his next step before leaving Scotland should be to endeavour to obtain the consent of Elsie's father to their engagement. His mother, he knew, would be averse to it; he would therefore send her a few lines to pacify her in the meantime, and trust to his powers of eloquence to persuade her when they met. Nothing doubting of his ability to do so, he wrote off rapidly:—

‘MY DEAR MOTHER—I am sorry any part of my conduct should have caused you annoyance. I do not, certainly, deserve to be called a “flirt,” and if Mrs. Lindsay told you so, all I can say is she must have been misinformed. I have formed no attachment which the most anxious parent could fail to approve; but more of this when I see you. I cannot fix an exact date for my return home, as Ardvoira insists on my staying here another

fortnight at least, after which my movements are uncertain; but I hope to despatch another box of grouse shortly. We are having fair sport, but the hot weather is rather against us. Love to all.—Your affectionate son,

‘D. A. LINDSAY.’

CHAPTER XV.

‘ Sie haben mich gequälet,
Geärgert blau und blass ;
Die eine mit ihrer Liebe,
Die andere mit ihrem Hass.’

AFTER the scene in her aunt's boudoir Elsie was in disgrace for many weary days.

Mrs. Lindsay scarcely spoke to her, and when she did, addressed her with elaborate politeness, and never asked her to perform any of the little services which she had been accustomed to render. Her entrance was the signal for cold looks and gloomy silence ; and even Miss Maynard, whose friend and champion Elsie had so often proved herself, was scarcely less chilling in her manner than Mrs. Lindsay. Elsie justly set this down to cowardice, but it hurt her nevertheless. She did not remonstrate ; pride forbade her even

to appear aware of it, she only carried her head a little higher, and was silent. Parkins, too, was maliciously triumphant ; she, in fact, had been the original cause of the whole disturbance, having enjoyed a full view of the lovers in the garden from her window, and at once hastened to inform her mistress of their guilt.

The Laird's letter did not tend to raise his daughter's spirits, yet she had expected from him some communication of the kind, and she thought he might be brought to relent. Her faith in David was unbounded ; what he would do she did not know, nor even try much to conjecture, but he was a wonderful being, like the Prince in a fairy tale, who would be sure to come by and by to her deliverance. But in the meantime her heart was heavy ; her aunt's displeasure weighed upon her ; and she began to torment herself with doubts as to whether she really had not been forward and improper, and if so, what David must think of her, now that he had time calmly to review the circumstances of

the case. She had some thoughts of going home, but she could not make up her mind to leave her aunt in anger, so she tried, by patient attention to her wishes, to win back her favour.

The General was always kind ; he would kiss his niece stealthily when he met her in the passage, and frame pretexts for keeping her talking to him in the study. He took great pleasure in a love affair, and would have been delighted to promote his nephew's interests, had he dared.

One day towards the end of August, Mrs. Lindsay received a visit from Mr. Maynard, who had just returned to Gravehurst, and who requested to see her alone. He told her that his health had suffered a good deal in London, and that he had given up all idea of returning to his old work. He had now become convinced that it was right for him to remain in his parish, and devote himself to the duties which lay before him there. He stopped, and looked at Mrs. Lindsay, who heard him with profound attention, but

as she gave him no word or sign of encouragement, he became a little confused. He went on to say, in a slightly aggrieved tone, that he now hoped—he might be allowed to express a hope—that Mrs. Lindsay would sanction his addresses to her niece, as he was now in a position to marry.

Mrs. Lindsay waited till he had quite finished his speech before she answered :

‘What you desire, Ernest, is entirely out of my power to grant you.’

Mr. Maynard was extremely taken aback by this reply. ‘Forgive me—I cannot surely have misunderstood you—your words when we parted gave me hope that——’

‘I gave you a *warning*,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, ‘a warning which you disregarded. And now’—she spread out her hands—‘what is the result? My niece’s affections are plighted to another!’

‘Impossible!’ cried Ernest, starting, and turning pale with anger. ‘Excuse me, but surely you cannot mean——’

‘My meaning,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, ‘is, I

trust, perfectly comprehensible. Elsie's heart is given to another, and that other, my husband's very dear grand-nephew !'

'In that case,' said Ernest, rising, 'I have nothing more to say. Do I understand that Miss Ross is engaged to your—grand-nephew ?'

'No,' said Mrs. Lindsay, 'you do not. Sit down again, and endeavour to command your temper. An engagement between them is strictly forbidden, being contrary to the wishes of their parents. It is possible, therefore,—Ernest, remember I only say possible,—that after a lapse of time you may succeed in winning her affections, although at first your addresses will probably be distasteful to her.'

'If Miss Ross prefers another man,' said Ernest, still in a white heat of indignation, 'I have no wish to force her inclinations. I withdraw my claim, and will now, if you please, take my leave for the present.'

He bowed stiffly, and cutting short the moral lesson which was trembling on Mrs. Lindsay's lips, left the room.

‘A shocking temper,’ said she to herself, ‘and what want of respect to me! A young man with so little control over his passions is totally unfitted to be a clergyman, and so I shall certainly tell him when next we meet. At present, I sadly fear, he is in no state to be reasoned with.’

She unlocked a drawer, took out David’s letter which she had received about a week before, and which had occasioned her unusual indecision of mind. She had been softened by it, and would have liked to accord him the interview he desired, forgive him with pomp, and readmit him to her favour; but this could not well be done without also giving her consent to his marriage. She had put off showing the letter to the General, preferring to nurse her indignation against David a little longer. But now, locking the drawer again, and saying with firmness, ‘I must have no secrets from my husband,’ Mrs. Lindsay marched with an air of martyr-like resolution to the study and laid the document before the General, with the remark that

David, dear fellow, seemed to regret his want of confidence, and had it not been that poor Eleanor would disapprove, he might, perhaps, have been permitted to come to the Elms.

‘Come?’ said the General, when he had, with some difficulty, mastered the contents of his nephew’s epistle—‘to be sure he must come. Can’t let him go to the inn, eh?’

This was exactly the point to which Mrs. Lindsay wished to bring her husband, having felt extremely dull ever since David left, and since she had quarrelled with Elsie.

‘My own Henry,’ said she, ‘consider the danger to which we should expose our young charge!’

‘No help for it,’ said the General—‘must have him, must have him! Going to bring his friend too, you know—eh—h’m!’

‘I am surprised at his selecting the King’s Head,’ said Mrs. Lindsay. ‘You know, dear, by what class of persons it is frequented.’

‘Can’t let them go to the inn, you know. Never do—never do—most inhospitable.’

‘If you feel it so, dear,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, with resignation, ‘of course your wishes are paramount.’

The good lady now knew no rest or peace of mind till she could have a reconciliation with Elsie; but this, she felt sure, would not be difficult to accomplish. She watched the girl one whole morning as she sat sewing in silence without raising her eyes, or moved about in a weary, subdued way, but could not, just then, find any pretext for speaking to her. While she was watching her niece, Mrs. Lindsay happened to drop the needle with which she herself was working; she uttered an exclamation of annoyance, for she had a peculiar dislike to losing anything, however insignificant.

‘Dear, dear!’ she said, ‘how very vexatious! I cannot find my needle, and I set a particular value upon that needle!’

Miss Maynard was at once upon her knees to search for the missing article, and Elsie too crossed the room to see if she could be of any help.

‘Go to your seat, Cecilia!’ said Mrs. Lindsay, irritably. ‘You, with your short sight, need not attempt to find anything.’

‘Here it is, Aunt Caroline!’ cried Elsie.

Mrs. Lindsay took the small pale face between both her hands and kissed it on each cheek.

‘Bless you, my love!’ said she emphatically.

Elsie felt that by this act she was restored to favour, and rejoiced; but to her, who had borne hostility with such proud composure, the change was almost too sudden. She presently made an excuse to retire to her room, and it was not until some time had elapsed, and after many applications of warm water to her eyes, that she ventured to descend, and cautiously to seat herself, with her back to the light, and armed with a large book, to screen herself from observation. Mrs. Lindsay had, however, the tact to take no notice; neither did she allude at all to David, nor to Elsie’s own misdemeanours. For several days all was peace and serenity;

Elsie and her aunt usually sat hand in hand, while Miss Maynard was thrust out, to occupy a distant seat.

Elsie felt the less sorry for the latter, as she observed how, like many weak persons, she was really pleasanter in adversity, and throve none the worse for being trampled upon.

Elsie was now to have some new acquaintances. Mrs. Lindsay informed her one morning that she had invited her two dear nieces, Emma and Sophy Dale, to pay her a visit. 'You require companionship, *female* companions of your own age, my love,' said she. 'These two dear girls usually visit me once a year, and I should wish you to become *friends*.'

In reply to her questions, Elsie elicited the facts, that these two girls were members of a numerous family; that their father, the Reverend Charles Dale, was Aunt Caroline's younger brother; that he was a curate in a suburb of London; and that they were very poor, which was entirely owing to Mr. Dale's

having disregarded the advice of his sister and best friend, particularly with reference to his marriage. Some of his elder sons and daughters were now married, and Emma, who was twenty, was the eldest at home, Sophy being two years younger.

As usual, Elsie begged for a personal description of the two she was to meet.

‘Emma,’ replied Aunt Caroline, ‘is not, I confess, a young person who is very attractive to me. Still, dear girl, she fulfils her home duties as well as she is able. But I think, Elsie, you will love my dear Sophy. She is a winning young creature,’ continued Aunt Caroline fondly, ‘frolicsome as a kitten, and with such a loving heart! A little heedless perhaps—you, my Elsie, must strive to use your influence for good, whilst they, I trust, are equally benefiting you. For each of us has our influence, remember that, my love—the unconscious influence of example.’

When the two girls arrived, and Elsie watched the frolicsome Sophy get out of the carriage, she could not help thinking that she

herself would be more apt to compare her gambols to those of a young cow than to the kitten to which Aunt Caroline had likened her. Sophy did, indeed, skip gleefully through the hall, and fell with effusion upon the necks of her uncle and aunt, followed by her more sedate sister.

Emma Dale was of middle height, and unremarkable looking. She had sleek dark hair, thin lips, and a sallow complexion.

Sophy was bigger and fairer, with light brown hair, a bright colour, large round greenish-hazel eyes, and rather large hands and feet. Partly from contradiction and partly from a desire to befriend the oppressed, Elsie had been more inclined towards the despised Emma; she watched her with interest, and tried to draw her out. Both girls evidently stood in great awe of their aunt. When in her presence Emma would venture upon no conversation, and only 'Yes, aunt'—'No, aunt'—'Thank you, aunt,' dropped nervously from her lips from time to time. This was not the road to Mrs. Lindsay's favour; and

Sophy, who, though probably not less frightened, was utterly unable to keep from chattering under any circumstances, had a decided advantage over her more cautious sister.

Mrs. Lindsay was in reality very kind to both her nieces, as well as to all her brother's family, whom she had helped in many ways ; but she chose to mark the lowered position into which she considered her brother, by his own fault, to have sunk, and therefore made a great show of keeping the girls in their proper place, imposing upon them many curious little rules and restrictions. They were not allowed to sit on arm-chairs or sofas ; they might not help themselves to jam or marmalade at breakfast unless it was specially offered to them by their uncle or aunt ; and, to train them for home usefulness, they not only sewed for an hour daily in Parkins' room, but Howell was instructed to initiate them into the mysteries of glass and silver cleaning, folding of table-cloths, etc. (William and Herbert, being unmarried, were strictly excluded during these lessons.)

Elsie's position in the house, her fearless manner towards her aunt, and the indulgence with which she was treated, was a matter of great surprise to both the girls. Emma did her best to conceal her astonishment, but met Elsie's advances with a dryness and asperity which drove the latter to take refuge with the more genial Sophy, who had conceived a violent affection for her from the moment she entered the house.

'Do be my friend, Elsie,' she said. 'I should so like to have you for my own particular friend. Emma has plenty of friends, besides you will never get on with her. She said last night that she could not make you out at all, and she thought you gave yourself great airs.'

'You should not repeat things that people say,' said Elsie, rather astonished at this burst of confidence.

'Oh, what does it matter? she would repeat things that *I* said in a minute. There she is—come this way; let us look as if we were talking about something secret.'

‘Why secret?’ inquired Elsie.

Sophy, in reply, gave her to understand that Emma’s friends were very particular friends indeed, and that her conferences with them were supposed to be of a dark and mysterious nature; moreover that she, Sophy, saw no reason why she and Elsie should be outdone in this respect.

‘If I had *you*,’ she added, ‘I would not care. Darling Elsie! you are far prettier than any of them—although Emma does say that your hair——’

‘Do be quiet!’ interrupted Elsie. ‘I don’t want to hear Emma’s remarks about me. Tell me about her friends. Are they not pretty?’

‘They are *good*,’ said Sophy, nodding her head, ‘very good. One of them is an invalid. She never gets off her sofa, except to get into a bath-chair.’

‘Poor thing—but is not that very sad?’ asked Elsie, rather puzzled at the triumphant tone of Sophy’s voice.

‘Not at all sad! she would be nothing if

she were not an invalid. She is the Heart of the House, like you read of in books. Everybody brings their joys and sorrows and difficulties and things to her. Her name is Grace Eaglefield. Then there is Edith Freeman, whose home is in ——shire,—uncle's relations live quite near it. She is a darling!'

'What is she like?' asked Elsie, suddenly roused to interest.

'Oh, she is very good too, but younger. She is a companion to her father, and a comfort to her mother, and a second mother to all her little brothers and sisters. And they live in such a nice, *dear* old English way, and have such good pork-pies, and she has the most lovely golden hair. It was about hers that Emma said you——'

'Hush!' said Elsie, and just then Emma came up.

'Emma!' cried Sophy, 'just come here and look at Elsie's hair. If it is not as yellow as Edith Freeman's it is twice as thick. Just compare it with your own miserable little knot—and yet you wear a——'

‘My hair is very fine,’ said Emma, reddening, ‘extremely fine. Naturally it goes into very small space. Now I should think that Elsie’s——’

‘Elsie’s is every bit as fine as yours,’ interrupted Sophy hotly—‘it is like silk.’

‘Oh, do leave our hairs alone!’ said Elsie. ‘Come and let us do the flowers. Hand me that bowl, Sophy,’ and Elsie shook the carnations she had just gathered out of her basket.

‘Are you allowed to use that bowl?’ asked Sophy in an awestruck tone, opening her eyes wide. ‘We never were allowed to touch it.’

‘Elsie is a prime favourite, that is evident,’ said Emma disagreeably.

This was not the first time that Elsie had heard the Freemans mentioned by Emma and Sophy, and knowing that they lived near Alkerton she secretly took an interest in them, and it must be confessed that the description of Edith’s golden hair and domestic virtues began to rankle somewhat unpleasantly in her mind. What right had

David to have a pretty and charming neighbour, and yet never even to have mentioned her name to her?

‘Yellower, but not so thick,’ Elsie said to herself meditatively, as she studied the back of her head with a hand-mirror. ‘I wonder, is she really so very pretty? most deceitful of David if she is—but to be sure Sophy talks a heap of nonsense. However, I shall certainly have it out with him when he comes.’

The sisters, in spite of frequent bickerings, were upon the whole affectionate; but Elsie found it difficult to be a friend of the one without being the enemy of the other. However, by being reserved and polite to Emma, she got on with her pretty well; while she treated Sophy, whose devotion to her continued with unabated ardour, with more affection than ceremony. The girls were both eager for excitements of all kinds, yet led perforce a somewhat monotonous life; for their aunt was exceedingly strict with them as regarded visits and parties of pleasure.

‘Young people between whom matrimony is impossible had better not associate,’ she used to say. They were therefore debarred from many social gatherings in which their souls would have delighted, and, in the absence of any excitement from without, Sophy’s romantic affection for Elsie went through alternate phases of suspicion, jealousy, hope, despair, and a variety of other passions. Elsie unconsciously gave her cause for some of these emotions by her absent manner at times. She was becoming anxious about David; it was now the middle of September, and nothing had been heard of him for some weeks; and as day after day passed and still the post brought no tidings of her lover, she began to have misgivings in spite of herself.

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